

October 16/17, 2004

The Good News About Jesus According to Mark

What Is A Christian?

Mark 3:7-35

Pastor Bryan Clark

According to a fairly recent poll, 83% of Americans consider themselves to be Christians, but only 4% of Americans actually hold a biblical worldview.¹ It seems to indicate there is a lot of confusion about what it means to be a Christian.

A couple of weeks ago I was flipping through the channels on the TV when a certain program caught my attention. The theme of the program was “*Who Would Jesus Vote For?*” They had a conservative Christian, Cal Thomas, and he was representing that view; and then there was a liberal Christian (how he referred to himself) representing a different view. Most of the interview included the same old talking points, and I thought this really was accomplishing nothing.

But then the person who represented the liberal side referred several times to his Christian faith and said, “My Christian faith allows for people of other faiths”—to which Cal Thomas responded, “But Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Me.’ ” He asked, “Do you believe this?” Immediately the other person went into some tirade about, “You fundamentalist! You literalist!”—which had nothing to do with those questions.

When he was done, Cal Thomas reeled him back in and said, “But Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.’ ” And he asked the question, “Do you think Jesus was telling the truth?” The liberal avoided the question and went off on some other tangent, saying that to be a Christian means helping widows and orphans, and on and on he went. So when he was done, Cal Thomas reeled it in one more time and said, “But Jesus said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me.’ Do you believe Jesus was lying when He said that?” And the liberal went off again and just avoided the question.

I found myself thinking that it is interesting so many people want to refer to themselves as Christians, which by definition is a *Christ follower*, but still do not want to follow Christ.

We have numbers of people—thousands of people—in our country who would consider themselves Christians. But either they do not know what Jesus taught or they simply don’t believe it. That raises the question: What is a Christian? What does it really mean to be a *Christ follower*?

We will look today at Mark 3 and then next week we will talk about more of the same, as Mark continues to define: What is a Christian?

Jesus has just concluded this encounter with the Pharisees over the Sabbath (that is the last topic Mark talked about). We pick up the story in verse 7:

Jesus withdrew to the sea with His disciples; and a great multitude from Galilee followed; and also from Judea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, a great number of people heard of all that He was doing and came to Him. And He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him because of the crowd, so that they would not crowd Him; for He had healed many, with the result that all

those who had afflictions pressed around Him in order to touch Him. Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, “You are the Son of God!” And He earnestly warned them not to tell who He was. (vs. 7-12, *NASB)

Jesus moved out to the Sea of Galilee, probably for no other reason than He needed some place where the crowds could be contained. Historians guess that by this time the crowds were in the tens of thousands of people. So they move out to a wide open area, and these people are coming from all over Israel, as much as 100 miles away. By now word is out as to what Jesus can do, and the crowds are flocking in.

It is interesting that Mark is very careful with his wording here. He does not tell us that people were hearing the message of Jesus—that they really understood who Jesus was. He’s very careful to say they had just heard what Jesus had done. As a matter of fact, it goes on to say that Jesus had healed many. So all those who were afflicted were pressing in. You get the distinct impression that these people didn’t really know who Jesus was; they didn’t really know what Jesus had been teaching, and frankly they didn’t care. They just heard that He could do miracles and they thought, *If I can get close enough to touch Him, maybe I can be healed.*

This was not an organized, respectful crowd; this was a mob. This was a crowd that was out of control. They were all in it for themselves, and they were pressing in upon Jesus to the extent that He said, “I need to make sure there is a boat ready if this crowd gets out of control.” In the text it says that they might “crowd” him. It’s the Greek word for “crush.” He was fearful that He would be trampled by the crowd, and He needed an escape just in case it got too ugly.

It’s interesting the way this paragraph is written, because at the end of it you have this major shift which doesn’t seem to fit the train of thought, but grammatically it still belongs in this paragraph. He’s telling us about the people that are coming who want to be healed, and suddenly out of nowhere it shifts into a discussion about the demons themselves when they saw Jesus and how they responded.

Any time you have a dramatic shift in the train of thought that doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense, it’s very important to key in on that. That is usually telling you the writers want you to notice something specific. I think what he is wanting us to notice here is the contrast between how the demons responded because they understood who Jesus was versus how the people responded because they didn’t. First, he’s telling us that this crowd is so out of control and so desperate to pursue and touch Jesus that He’s fearful He might get crushed. Then he’s telling us that the demons, when they encountered Jesus, immediately fell on their faces and declared, “Jesus, You are the Son of God!”—a very clear statement of His deity. Jesus didn’t want the pronouncement of His mission coming from the mouths of demons, so He quickly silenced them. I think what Mark wants to emphasize is that the demons immediately recognized Jesus for who He was, and there was nothing they could do but fall before the superior power and declare Him to be God. But this large group of people did not know who Jesus was, and frankly, most of them probably didn’t care.

About halfway through Jesus’ ministry, He makes a shift from doing many miracles to doing less miracles and much more teaching. He starts to tell people, “This is what it means to follow Me; this is what it is going to cost you.” Most of these crowds dwindled away. They weren’t there for that teaching; they didn’t care about His message.

If we were to categorize these people in modern-day terms, I would say these people were religious *consumers*. These people would have considered themselves to be Christians in the sense that, yes, they were traveling a long distance to follow Jesus. But the reality is, they weren't following Jesus, because they didn't really care who He was and they didn't really care what He had to say. They were pursuing their own personal agendas with the hopes that Jesus could somehow do something for them. They were consumers.

There's a popular message today called the gospel of health, wealth and prosperity that is very appealing to the consumer. It basically says that if you choose to follow Jesus, He will heal all your diseases and He will make sure that you are wealthy and prosperous. Now, who wouldn't want that? That appeals to consumers. They are really not interested in who Jesus is. They are not terribly interested in following Jesus. They're certainly not interested in surrender. They are on their own personal missions with their own agendas, and they're hopeful that somehow Jesus can help them fulfill their own selfish desires. So in the end, they're really not following Christ; they're following themselves and hoping Jesus can help with that. We would call them religious consumers.

That is certainly contrasted with the next paragraph, when Jesus talks about those who are truly His followers. Verse 13:

And He went up on the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons. (vs. 13-14)

Jesus now moves up into the mountains. What is interesting here is that these men are not the crowds that are pressing in around Him; these are the ones that Jesus calls by name. These are the men that He knows are truly His followers, and He calls them. And what does He call them *to*? Well, you might think He would call them to preach and to take authority over demons. But that's not what He called them to. What does the text say? It says He called them to "be with Him."

It is very important we understand that the essence of Christianity is *to be with Jesus*. It means to dwell in His presence; it's a relationship with Him. Oftentimes we think it is to go out and *do* something, but the essence of Christianity is *to be with Jesus*. That is the radical nature of the message. How can sinful people dwell in the presence of a holy God? It is through Jesus the Savior. It is through Jesus, His person and His work, that sinners can dwell in the presence of a holy God. We can *be with Jesus*.

Then what happens when we are with Jesus is that we begin to understand His passion. We begin to understand His purpose. We begin to surrender our own agendas and our consumer interests, and we begin to become compassionate about that which matters to Him. We begin to shift our purpose in life. But it flows out of the fact that we have been with Jesus.

So that is what Mark is saying: Jesus called those who would be with Him. That is the essence of Christianity—it is *to be with Jesus*. The disciples would be with Jesus, and out of that would flow the sense of purpose that they would preach and take authority over demons.

Then Jesus goes on and names them:

And He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter), and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the

name Boanerges, which means, “Sons of Thunder”); and Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him.
(vs. 16-19)

Jesus called together quite an interesting collection of personalities and backgrounds—certainly not a group of people that you would think could come together to be a team. But this would be His leadership team through whom He would change the world.

It did get me thinking that oftentimes when we talk about forming a team, one of the things we talk about is chemistry. We might say that for a team to really function as a team, there has to be chemistry. Often when we refer to that, what we are thinking about is personalities. But it is very important to understand that what ultimately makes a team is not personality—it’s *purpose*. Jesus brought together a wide range of personalities and backgrounds, but what He was doing was bringing them together for a common purpose. If you have a common purpose you can be a team. If team members have different purposes, the right mix of personalities cannot compensate for that. The ultimate essence of team is purpose, and purpose comes from being with Jesus.

The story goes on:

And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, “He has lost His senses.” (vs. 20-21)

That is a mild translation. In the Greek it means “He has lost his mind; He has gone crazy; He’s had a breakdown; He’s not right anymore.”

Jesus goes back home, and the crowds start coming in again, to the extent that Jesus and His disciples cannot even eat. These people are only identified as Jesus’ own people. There are arguments about whether this meant family or friends; the Greek word goes either way. It’s probably a little of both. But what Mark does want us to know is these are people who love Jesus. These are people who care about Him. These are people who feel a sense of connection to Him. These are His own people—in essence, His family and friends—and they’re looking around at what is happening. The crowds are coming in, and now they can’t even eat. They are hearing what Jesus is saying. He’s in conflict with the scribes and the Pharisees and they’re saying, “This whole thing has gotten out of control. We think Jesus has lost it! We think He’s gone crazy; He’s had a breakdown!”

When it says that they came to take “custody” of Him, that is a word that is typically translated “to arrest” Him. It does mean that, if necessary, they will take Him physically by force and they’ll carry Him back home. This was an intervention, because in their minds, *He’s lost it*.

The first group of people we called consumers. This group of people we are going to call *sympathizers*. These were the people who really cared about Jesus and they were concerned for His wellbeing, but they just didn’t get it. They didn’t understand the radical nature of who Jesus was and what He had come to do. They were sympathetic, but they were not followers.

I would say in that 83% of Americans who consider themselves to be Christians, there is a large portion who fall into this category. They are sympathetic to the things of Christ. These are people that faithfully attend church. Most of them are good, moral people. They highly

affirm the value of the Bible. (They may not read it, but they think it's a very important book.) They are very sympathetic to the cause of Jesus; and when you talk about Jesus, they are on board with that. When you talk about Jesus and the gospel and the cross, they're with you. They celebrate Christmas; they celebrate Easter. They're very sympathetic to all of that. But the fact is, they just don't get it. They don't understand the radical nature of the message of Jesus: that Jesus as the Savior offers this radical new birth. They don't understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus. They have never embraced it as their own.

Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about because you have family and friends who simply do not understand why you are so passionate about Jesus. They think you've lost it. They think you've lost your senses and gone a little bit crazy. They don't understand. They say, "Why do you spend so much time? Why do you spend so much money? Why do you give all of this? I mean, it just seems like you've carried this to an extreme. You're a little bit out of balance!" They see the "God thing" as being just one little part of their life, and they keep it there. But for you it's all consuming, and they think you've gone whacky! "You've joined that cult out there on 70th & Highway 2, and we're concerned for you. We think we need to do an intervention!"

They just don't understand the radical message of the gospel. This message is absolutely life-transforming, and when you spend time with Jesus you begin to give up the agenda of this earth, and you begin to pour your life into that which matters. The sympathetic crowd just doesn't understand that.

Well, there was a third crowd that Jesus encountered. It's a group of people that we're going to call the *antagonizers*.

The scribes who came down from Jerusalem [notice these were the big shots that came down from the home office] were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house." (vs. 22-27)

The scribes "from the home office" have come to pay a little visit to Jesus, and their assignment is to somehow explain how it is that Jesus is doing these miraculous things. "The people are seeing these things. We have to explain this!" So they come up with a very irrational reason: "We think He is possessed by a demon. We think He is doing this with the power of Satan himself." That is their explanation to the people: that the way Jesus does this is He is filled with the power of Satan.

So Jesus calls them on it. "Wait a minute," He says, "Come on over here; let's talk about this. What sense does it make that I would be casting out demons in the power of Satan? To do that means Satan is attacking his own army; he is attacking his own demons. A house divided will certainly fail. If this is true, then Satan is finished. He is going to destroy himself." Jesus is saying that makes no sense; that's ludicrous! Satan would not be attacking his own army.

That leaves only one explanation, and that is where He tells His little story. “If you’re going to go into the house of the strong man and plunder his house, you first better make sure that the strong man is tied up, thrown in a closet somewhere.” Jesus is saying, “Do you know what I’m doing here? I’m plundering the house of the enemy! And do you know how I’m doing that? It is because I first bound the strong man.”

What Jesus is saying is: “I’m not doing this in the power of Satan, but this is a power greater than Satan. This is a power so great that I can bind him and I’m plundering his house”—which, again, is a clear declaration of Jesus’ deity. He is saying this is being done in the power of God. That is the only explanation that made any sense.

You know, these scribes from Jerusalem were very interesting people. They clearly would have considered themselves to be highly religious, to be experts in the Old Testament Law. In today’s terminology they certainly would have included themselves in the 83% who call themselves Christians. But they weren’t sympathetic towards Jesus. They were offended by His methods. They were on the attack.

They are like the gentleman that was on the television debate who clearly referred to his own Christian faith a number of times. Yet, the reality is they are not just sympathetic; they are actually antagonistic toward the very message of Christ. While they preach a message of tolerance, they are highly intolerant of Jesus Himself. These antagonists who want to consider themselves to be Christians deny the very essence of Christ. To be a Christian is to be a Christ follower. Yet they want to deny what Jesus so clearly said.

Jesus goes on and talks a little bit more about what’s happening here. Mark 3:28:

“Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.” (vs. 28-31)

This concept of an unpardonable sin has caused many Christians a lot of unnecessary anxiety. I have had people tell me they are concerned they have committed the unpardonable sin. The first thing I tell them is that if you are asking that question, you know you *haven’t*—because people who have committed that sin don’t ask that question. They don’t care about whether or not they’ve committed that sin. That’s the last thing they would think about.

Jesus was saying that it is the power of the Holy Spirit that is revealing who He is and what He came to do. The power of the Holy Spirit has made that so evident. They can commit any sin and God will still forgive them. But if they deny the person and work of Jesus Christ, there is no means by which God can forgive them—because they have denied the only way to salvation. That’s the unpardonable sin. The unpardonable sin is to deny Jesus as the Christ. Every other sin can be forgiven. But to reject Jesus Christ as the Savior leaves no means by which God can grant forgiveness.

Technically, no person has committed the unpardonable sin until the moment he or she dies. You can deny Jesus your whole life, but if, at the moment before death you repent of that, God will forgive that sin if you trust Jesus as Savior. The unpardonable sin is to die having rejected Jesus as Savior. When you stand before God, therefore, there is no means by which you can be forgiven. And it’s a warning to these scribes who were determined to deny the reality of Jesus and His work.

You know, in looking at these antagonists, we see how they struggle with this concept. It's the same question that Cal Thomas raised when he quoted Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but through Me." That truth is stated over and over and over again in the New Testament—that Jesus is the only way of salvation. But many so-called Christians are very offended by that, so they will refer to us as being intolerant, rigid, judgmental fundamentalists. They want to be considered Christians, but they deny the very essence of Christ Himself.

Mark closes this section with a discussion about Jesus' family:

Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" Looking about at those who were sitting around Him [meaning His disciples], He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother." (vs. 31-35)

Mark is using what some commentators call his "sandwich technique." It's the idea that Mark brings something up, like the discussion of the twelve, then he goes on and talks about something else; and then he comes back to it again. It's a way of making a larger point so we see not just the specifics, but the whole. He has talked about those whom He has called to be with Him—to be about His business. Then He goes on to talk about the sympathizers and the antagonizers and how they are responding. But now He's back to talking about His disciples again. It makes for a theological sandwich.

As Jesus' birth family had arrived and were looking for him, Jesus took this opportunity to define who really is His family. Who is it that is part of the family of Jesus? In other words, who really is a Christian? Jesus said, "It is these who are sitting here; these whom I've called to be with Me. And because they are with Me, they will go out and be about My purpose." He sums that up here by saying, "Those who do the will of God."

What is a Christian? Among the 83% of Americans who call themselves Christians, many of them are simply *consumers*. They are just busy about their own agendas. They really don't care who Jesus is; they don't really care what Jesus has to say. They are just hoping that God can somehow help them on their way to accomplishing their selfish agendas. They are really not followers of Christ; they are just consumers. That is not the definition of a Christian.

Within that 83%, there are those who are *sympathizers*—probably the largest percentage. These are the ones who are sympathetic to the cause of Jesus. They seem to be responsive to it, but they just don't get it. It's just a little part of their life, and they try to keep it there, but they really have never trusted Jesus as Savior. They don't know what it really means to dwell with Jesus. They are just sympathetic to the cause.

And then there are the *antagonists*—those who want to come under the label of Christianity but deny the very essence of Christ Himself. They really don't want to follow what Jesus said. They aren't interested in surrendering. They are antagonistic.

What is a true Christian? A Christian is one who has embraced the person and work of Jesus, who understands Jesus was God in the flesh, that His mission was to be the Savior of the world, and that His death on the cross provides forgiveness of sin which makes it possible for sinful men and women to dwell with the holy God.

The essence, then, of Christianity is through Jesus Christ. By embracing His person and work, we dwell with Jesus; we are *with Jesus*. And the more we are with Jesus—the more we dwell with Jesus—the more we start to understand His heart, His passion, His purpose. Rather than living for our agendas and for the things of this world, we begin to shift to the things that matter to Him.

A true Christian is one who has been with Jesus, and as a result of that says, “Jesus, it is for this purpose—Your purpose—that I will live.”

Our Father, we are thankful that God became flesh in Jesus to become the Savior of the world, that those who embrace the person and work of Jesus, those who trust Jesus and His death on the cross as payment for sin experience the forgiveness of sin. Lord, through Jesus we are called to dwell with Him, and out of that time comes our passion for His purpose, to be about the things that last forever.

Lord, we don't want to be numbered among the consumers who just want to use Jesus for their own selfish reasons. We don't want to be numbered among the sympathetic who seem to be sympathetic toward the message and the cause, but they just don't get it. They've never truly placed their trust in Jesus as Savior. And we certainly don't want to be numbered among the antagonizers who fight against the very message of Jesus.

Lord, we want to be numbered among the true Christians—the Christ followers. I pray that each of us would know what it means to be with Jesus and be able to say from our hearts, “Yes, it is for this purpose that I will live.” In Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ www.barna.org Dec. 1, 2003 Update: *A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life*

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Study Questions

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Opening Discussion

1. How does our culture define the term “Christian”?
2. How is it possible that people can deny what Jesus taught, and even deny Jesus Himself, and still consider themselves Christian?
3. Define a Christian in one sentence.

Bible Study

1. Read Mark 3:7-12. What were the crowds seeking?

In what way do these verses describe what many so-called Christians are seeking from Jesus today?

Does the term “consumer Christians” accurately describe these people? Why or why not?

2. In what way do the demons provide a contrast from the multitudes in terms of their response to Jesus? (v. 11)

3. Read 3:13-19. Jesus called forth His leadership team. What was their calling?

How do these men differ from those mentioned in the previous paragraph?

4. Read 3:20-27. Jesus was constantly misunderstood and falsely accused by others. What can we expect when we choose to be a Christ follower?

5. What is the unforgivable sin according to 3:28-30?

Why is it unforgivable?

6. Read 3:31-35. Who did Jesus say are His family?

What is the will of the Father according to 3:14,15?

7. Mark presents us with “consumer Christians” who simply wanted to use Jesus for selfish gain, family and friends who thought He was crazy, and religious leaders who thought He was demon possessed. But what is a true Christ follower according to Jesus?

Application

1. Do you think you are more like the multitudes in 3:7-12 or like the apostles in 3:13-19, 35? Why?
2. Should we expect to be understood and appreciated by others for being a follower of Christ? Why or why not?
3. Are you a true Christian? Why or why not?