

1. Introducing Jesus, *the Son of God*

Biblical material: Mark 1:1–20.

Quotes:

- Either He [Jesus] was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what he said. *C. S. Lewis*
- A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. *C. S. Lewis*

Introductory questions

Why the stress on the Son of God? What is Mark's main concern? How does he approach the story of Jesus? What does Mark seem to assume about his readers? Why leave out the birth of Jesus? Why put the temptations in so early? What was Jesus' call as he began his ministry? How come the disciples responded so easily? What did they see in Jesus?

Discussion ideas

The gospel is written for a very specific purpose. Mark's brief account is designed to emphasize one primary theme—that Jesus is truly God. Yet in doing so, Mark also reveals what *kind* of God Jesus is, and what *values* this God demonstrates. Mark chooses to emphasize action over instruction—he is the prototypical journalist who believes the motto, “Show, don't tell.” So in the very actions of Jesus, Mark reveals the kind of person he is—his values, principles, and character. In so many ways, Mark's gospel is the elemental (it is very short) yet vital presentation of the God who comes to act. For those who say, “Why doesn't God *do* something?” the gospel of Mark is God's answer.

As we examine the events Mark describes, let us not see them as just stories about Jesus' life. Each one is carefully chosen to tell us something about this Jesus, and consequently something extremely important about God. Ask the question “What does this event tell me about God and his character?” Consider the values and principles it illustrates—both about Jesus, and those with whom he interacts. Put yourself in Mark's shoes, and question why you would want to record this event, and what lessons you draw from it. For this Jesus is truly God.

So first question—why does Mark begin with a quote from the Old Testament, and why does he first talk about John the Baptist? Is this not because Mark clearly wants to link Jesus with the God of the Old Testament, and John as the bridge that links the two? But why does Mark leave out the miraculous birth of Jesus?

Mark chooses to start talking about Jesus at his baptism. Again, why? The first miraculous events are the Spirit descending like a dove, and the voice from heaven. Why is this so important? Again, remember that Mark is primarily trying to convince his readers that Jesus is God. So it is not surprising that he should begin with this divine confirmation of Jesus' ministry.

Within 12 verses Satan makes his appearance. What does that tell you? Already the Great Controversy scene is set as Jesus experiences the devil's temptations. Remember what they were, and ask yourself if they are temptations designed for a human being or a divine being. Again, Mark does not waste any words, so each should be weighed carefully. Why choose to describe Jesus temptations so early, and what do they reveal about Jesus?

Jesus makes a simple announcement, following on the message of John. The disciples respond readily. What is going on here?

Ellen White Comments

The Son of God came to be a light to the world, to reveal wonders to the children of men that even the angels had vainly longed to understand. He patiently explains the marvelous transformation of sinful mortals into children of God and heirs with himself in the kingdom of Heaven. The introduction of sin had opened the door to every species of suffering and wretchedness, till moral darkness shrouded the earth like a funeral pall; but Jesus, the Restorer, brings man into connection with himself and re-creates him in the divine image. {2SP 250}

Christ came to the world to reveal the character of the Father, and to redeem the fallen race. The world's Redeemer was equal with God. His authority was as the authority of God. He declared that he had no existence separate from the Father. The authority by which he spoke, and wrought miracles, was expressly his own, yet he assures us that he and the Father are one. John bore witness of Christ, and pointed all men to him as the promised Messiah. When he beheld Jesus before him, he declared, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me; for he was before me." "And of his fullness have we all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." {RH, January 7, 1890}

Extra material

The promise of God to be with us as Emmanuel is surely the most amazing fact of Christianity. Indeed, from the very beginning when God met with man in the garden he has been trying to live and *be* with us. In the pillar of smoke by day, and the pillar of fire by night God showed the Israelites he was really with them. In the smoke and thunder, lightning and flashes of Mt. Sinai, God demonstrated his presence, and met with his people. And when Moses came down from the mount, his face gleamed with the reflected glory of being with God. So too in the Shekinah glory that filled Solomon's temple, God said, "I am with you." Really. Truly. Practically. God wants to be with us, and all his efforts are directed to that goal.

Yet all this was not enough. All the symbols and signs, all the thunder and lightning, could not truly express the presence of God. Not even the ark of the covenant, nor the glorious temple, could say enough about God living with us. So "God sent his Son..." In Isaiah 7:14 and 8:8 the name of this one to come is "Emmanuel." And when Jesus was born, his parents were clearly told, "You shall call his name Emmanuel" God with us. He is here. God is now present with fallen humanity. He has arrived. Through all of Jesus life, and death, and resurrection comes the proof of the truth of his name. Yet strangely enough, apart from that brief reference in Matthew, Jesus is never referred to as Emmanuel. Why not?

Because through he was truly God with us, Jesus came not as the glorious king but as the suffering servant. His Messianic titles are disregarded, and Jesus referred to himself simply as "the Son of man." A man among men; human. As such, he was limited and restricted, subject to the same pains and sicknesses, the same troubles and temptations as all us. And this Jesus, this God with us, died with us as a criminal nailed to a cross. Jesus, Emmanuel, was with us for such a terribly short time. So, even though the birth of Jesus really was the beginning of "God with us", the full reality of the complete presence of God remains unfulfilled. After thirty short years, the bodily presence of Emmanuel was ended, first in the crucifixion and then in the ascension. What then of God with us, of the promised one who lives with humanity? Only through the reunion of His return is God with us, Emmanuel, a permanent reality for all eternity.

2. Amazing Miracle Worker

Biblical material: Mark 1:21–2:17.

Quotes:

- To be conscious that you are ignorant is a great step to knowledge. *Benjamin Disraeli*
- Once God’s existence is granted as a possibility, miracles can’t be dismissed out-of-hand. Rather, whether or not a given miracle has occurred becomes a historical matter that calls for investigation. *C.S. Lewis*
- The miracles of Jesus were the ordinary works of his Father, wrought small and swift that we might take them in. *George MacDonald*

Introductory questions

What is the significance of miracles? What do they prove? Was Jesus’ purpose to be an “amazing miracle worker”? How did the people react to Jesus’ miracles? Why didn’t the teachers of the law “have authority”? Why did Jesus silence the evil spirit/demons? Which is easier—to forgive or to heal? Why the emphasis on healing? What about fasting?

Discussion ideas

What about the miracles? Some identify the miracles as primary proof of Jesus’ divinity. However it is also easy to believe in miracles for personal profit, or to provide conviction. Then what about spurious miracles, as for example when the Devil comes impersonating Christ? Will they be persuasive, convicting?

Sunday’s lesson: “Jesus eventually would be rejected by many of the people He came to deliver because they would refuse to acknowledge who He truly was, *despite the powerful evidence given them*. In contrast, the devils recognized Him, and bowed before His authority. Talk about irony!” Should miracles be the basis of proof? What about false evidence?

Jesus many miracles complicated his life. He was unable to travel freely, because of the pressing demands of so many people. What if he had healed everybody, everywhere, all at once? Would that have solved the problem, or made it worse? Almost immediately we see that Jesus is “dismissed” as a faith-healer. That is why Jesus confronts the issue with the paralytic man let down through the roof. In the eyes of the Pharisees, it was OK to perform miraculous healings, but who would dare to forgive someone! Yet in their comments, they set up the issue that is at the heart of the story—is Jesus God? For they say, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Mark 2:7 NIV. In a way they’re right. But their ideas about forgiving sins are rejected by Jesus who carries out healing. He is not simply stating, but demonstrating, that the primary problem we have is not our legal standing before God but the fatal results of the sin-disease. That is why Jesus is so concerned to focus on healing the damage done, not on arguing over whether it is just or legal for God to forgive.

Jesus further emphasizes this point when he says, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” 2:17 NIV. Of course, none are righteous anyway, and we all need the healing only he can provide. But if we see ourselves as being righteous already, then God can’t help us. Like any 12-step program, solutions only begin to be found when we admit we have a problem, the right problem. The problem the Pharisees had was a false estimate of their righteousness, and a false picture of God. A sobering thought for all who claim to speak for our heavenly Father...

Ellen White Comments

God gives sufficient evidence, but man, with his unsanctified will, refuses to receive evidence unless it comes in his own way, to favor his own ideas. With a spirit of bravado he cries, "Proof, proof, is what we want," and turns away from the evidence that God gives. He talks doubt, unbelief, sowing the seeds of evil which will spring up and yield their harvest. He is separating his soul farther and farther from God. Is it proof that such men need? Is it evidence that is wanting?—No... {RH, December 23, 1890}

Christ had said to the nobleman whose son He healed, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe." John 4:48. He was grieved that His own nation should require these outward signs of His Messiahship. Again and again He had marveled at their unbelief. {DA 315}

God's servants today could not work by means of miracles, because spurious works of healing, claiming to be divine, will be wrought. {2SM 54}

God's people will not find their safety in working miracles, for Satan will counterfeit the miracles that will be wrought. {9T 16}

The best way to expose the fallacy of error is to present the evidences of truth. {Ev 577}

Extra Material

What are Jesus' miracles for? Not primarily to promote Jesus, but to help the recipients... All Jesus' miracles are for our benefit. Because Jesus cared so much for the pain and suffering of those around him—he went around "healing every sickness and every disease among the people" because "he was moved with compassion" Matthew 9:35, 36 KJV. Before the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." Matthew 15:32 NIV.

Time and again Jesus' miracles come because he cares so very much—about the leper, about the blind man, about the widow's son who has died... And even though Jesus knows what he's about to do for Mary and Martha—to miraculously raise their brother Lazarus from the dead—he still is overcome by their agony, and weeps with them.

Jesus' miracles are not done for great display, like a showman demonstrating his supernatural powers, but simply as part of life—of being the God who cares and shares, who walks with us every day.

The downside of miracles is that people still refuse to believe, and discount God anyway: "now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father." John 15:23, 24 NIV. Jesus warns against dependence on miracles, because "false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect--if that were possible. So be on your guard." Mark 13: 22-23 NIV.

Ultimately, the miraculous is only to help confirm the confidence we have in a loving, caring God. Jesus shook his head in sorrow at the people of his day, who just wanted him to do miracles, and didn't care about his message: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." John 4:48 NIV.

The ultimate proof is not even in the miracles. Rather it is in the life, death and resurrection of this Jesus, and the greatest miracle is in his ability to save and heal you and me. For, as John concludes in his gospel, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John 20: 30, 31.

3. Sabbath Healings *and* Hard Hearts

Biblical material: Mark 2:23–3:35.

Quotes:

- The external observance of the Sabbath rest is a Jewish ceremonial ordinance and no longer binding on Christians. Sabbatarians surpass the Jews three times over in a crass and carnal Sabbatarian superstition. *John Calvin*
- Day of the Lord, as all our days should be! *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*
- God himself took a day to rest in, and a good man’s grave is his Sabbath. *John Donne*

Introductory questions

Why are Sabbath issues introduced here? What is the point being made? How does Jesus relate to religious hypocrisy? Why didn’t Jesus wait until after Sabbath—after all, this was hardly a life-and-death emergency? What does Jesus teach through these actions? Why does Mark repeat again that the evil spirits called Jesus “the Son of God”?

Discussion ideas

Monday’s lesson states, “Even on the Sabbath, a day for worship and contemplation of heavenly things, the enemies of Jesus could not keep their minds off Him. Instead of opening their hearts to the blessings that God had for them through the reading of Scripture, prayer and fellowship, they kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, waiting to see if they might find an opportunity to accuse Him. They wanted to *prove* that He was a Sabbath-breaker, but they themselves were breaking the Sabbath in their hearts.”

However the lesson does not really address the issue of why Jesus so deliberately and consistently healed on Sabbath, almost in a challenging way. Even if Jesus had been following Adventist principles, he would have been in violation of what we promote. For the miracles of healing were not “urgent” in the sense that they were life-threatening. He could have waited until after the Sabbath before performing the miracle. So why did Jesus deliberately act this way?

It’s important to notice that Mark says it is because of this very incident that they begin plotting to take Jesus’ life. Here we see the results of a false religious system that seeks to stay in power even at the cost of an innocent life. Because so much is invested in this systematized salvation-by-payment that the idea that God can freely forgive is condemned. For this is not the kind of God they want. Rather they want the contractual system they have developed, because then they can continue as they are. But Jesus weeps over them, for they will not come to him to be healed.

Even though the demons and evil spirits readily identify Jesus as the Son of God, Jesus rebukes them. He wants no testimony apart from the evidence of truth, truth in action in his life. The result is that he is accused—even by his own family—of being out of his mind, while the teachers of the law say he is demon-possessed and that he casts our devils in the devil’s name! All that Jesus is identified with today he experienced during his life: mad, mentally-disturbed, demonic...

And only if he really *is* the Son of God can it be true. That’s the point made time and time again by Mark. Just look at the evidence, he says. Does it make sense to say he drives out devils in the devil’s name? No, nothing makes sense unless Jesus is who he truly claims to be: the Son of God who reveals God to us, and comes to save us from our sinful selves.

Ellen White Comments

The Saviour well knew that in healing on the Sabbath He would be regarded as a transgressor, but He did not hesitate to break down the wall of traditional requirements that barricaded the Sabbath. Jesus bade the afflicted man stand forth, and then asked, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?” It was a maxim among the Jews that a failure to do good, when one had opportunity, was to do evil; to neglect to save life was to kill. Thus Jesus met the rabbis on their own ground. {DA 286}

...the work of Christ in healing the sick did honor to the holy Sabbath. Jesus claimed equal rights with God in doing a work equally sacred and of the same character with that which engaged his Father in Heaven. But the Pharisees were still more incensed, because he had not only broken the law, according to their understanding, but added to this offense the heinous sin of declaring himself equal with God. Nothing but the interference of the people prevented the Jewish authorities from slaying him on the spot. {2SP 164}

Jesus wished to correct the false teachings of the Jews in regard to the Sabbath and also to impress his disciples with the fact that deeds of mercy were lawful on that day. In the matter of healing the withered hand he broke down the custom of the Jews, and left the fourth commandment standing as God had given it to the world. By this act he exalted the Sabbath, sweeping away the senseless restrictions that encumbered it. His act of mercy did honor to the day, while those who complained of him, were, by their many useless rites and ceremonies, themselves dishonoring the Sabbath. {2SP 199}

Extra material

Jesus is confronted by incensed and offended religionists. Their belief structure is one based on what is lawful. That’s the first question “Are you allowed to...?” This is not legalism necessarily, but a stress on legality—the first point of reference is to ask what the law says. So the disciples’ action of simply picking and eating grain is to them a violation of Sabbath law. They see no farther than what they perceive to be a clear breaking of a holy law. Nothing more needs to be said. The law is beyond debate.

Theirs is a fatal logic. Since picking a head of grain is to be equated to reaping, and rubbing the grains between hands is the equivalent of threshing, the disciples are working on the Sabbath. They do not think to ask if this is real work. They would not even dare to inquire why work on the Sabbath was prohibited by God in the first place. If they had done so, they might have decided that picking and eating a few ears of grain was not the same as manual labor. For why did God say not to work? Was it not so we could spend time with Him? And the disciples were already with God in Christ, speaking and listening to him throughout the Sabbath day.

But this is not the absolutist logic of the Pharisees. In his answer Jesus points to the higher “law” of fulfilling not legal requirements but rather fundamental principles, referring them to the actions of David and of the “work” done by priests on the Sabbath, concluding that: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27, 28 NIV.

The Pharisees, the self-proclaimed keepers of the law—already incensed—would hardly have taken such words easily. Jesus is claiming to be more important, and to supersede, the very temple—the shrine of the law. He even claims supremacy as Lord of the Sabbath. As the Sabbath’s Lord, he determines its purpose and relevance. And he tells us—it’s for us, not to please him!

4. By Galilee

Biblical material: Mark 4:1–5:43.

Quotes:

- Most people would rather die than think; in fact, they do so. *Bertrand Russell*
- Nothing can be more contrary to religion and the clergy than reason and common sense... Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror. *Voltaire*
- In Christianity neither morality nor religion come into contact with reality at any point. *Nietzsche*
- Religion is fundamentally opposed to everything I hold in veneration—courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and, above all, love of the truth. *Mencken*
- Clearly the person who accepts the Church as an infallible guide will believe whatever the Church teaches. *Thomas Aquinas*

Introductory questions

Why are there so many responses to the gospel “seed”? Does God limit forgiveness? Why did Jesus still the storm—was this to impress? Why does Jesus tell us not to be afraid? What about the healing of the demoniac—what about the poor pigs? Jairus’ daughter is raised from the dead—but Jesus says, “no publicity.” Why?

Discussion ideas

The story of the sower—the different fates of the gospel—is readily understood. So why does Jesus seem to imply (verse 12) that God does not want to forgive? The teachings of Jesus make it very clear that God operates from the perspective of individual freedom and responsibility. So the idea that God would want to prevent understanding or perception is obviously incorrect, as is the idea that God is trying to limit forgiveness. Jesus may be presenting the perspective of those who want to make God remote and disinterested—the very opposite of the kind of God he came to reveal. As if...

Jesus himself says he is all about disclosure and revelation (verses 21, 22). God’s system is one of complete openness and transparency. The only reason God uses “dark speech” or parables is because we are unwilling or unready to accept the truth. In order to prevent immediate confrontation Jesus uses stories as a way to gain interest and reflection.

“Jesus, the source of all wisdom, never tried to impress people with His knowledge or dazzle them with intellectual sleight of hand. Instead, He laid truth on the line, presented through the disarmingly simple approach of stories from common life.” Sunday’s lesson.

As he quells the storm at sea, he is still revealing God when he says, “Don’t be afraid!” This is not a power miracle to enforce belief, but an invitation to be friends with the divine. Similarly in his treatment of the demoniac, his desire is to heal and calm rather than conflict. Once again Mark records the admission of Jesus’ divinity by the demons. They are in no doubt and believe, though of course their belief does not lead to repentance...

The demoniac is healed. The pigs drown. Instead of rejoicing, then people want Jesus gone. Then one of the few instances of resurrection miracle—the raising of Jairus’ daughter. And for those who think that Jesus did the miracles just to prove something, remember that he told those involved to say nothing about it. What does this tell us about God?

Ellen White Comments

The Pharisees scoffed at Christ; they criticized the simplicity of his language, which was so plain that the child, the aged, the common people heard him gladly, and were charmed by his words. The Sadducees also derided him because his discourses were so unlike anything delivered by their rulers and scribes. Those Jewish teachers spoke in monotonous tones, and the plainest and most precious scriptures were made uninteresting and unintelligible, buried under such a mass of tradition and learned lore that after the Rabbis had spoken, the people knew less of the meaning of the Scriptures than before they listened. There were many souls starving for the Bread of Life, and Jesus fed them with pure, simple truth. In his teaching he drew illustrations from the things of nature and the common transactions of life, with which they were familiar. Thus the truth became to them a living reality; the scenes of nature and the affairs of daily life were ever repeating to them the Saviour's precious teachings. Christ's manner of teaching was just what he desires his servants to follow. {CE 142-3}

“Like a Grain of Mustard Seed.” In the multitude that listened to Christ's teaching there were many Pharisees. These noted contemptuously how few of His hearers acknowledged Him as the Messiah. And they questioned with themselves how this unpretending teacher could exalt Israel to universal dominion. Without riches, power, or honor, how was He to establish the new kingdom? Christ read their thoughts and answered them: {COL 76}

All the truth that has been given to the world through patriarchs and prophets shone out in new beauty in the words of Christ. But the scribes and Pharisees had no desire for the precious new wine. Until emptied of the old traditions, customs, and practices, they had no place in mind or heart for the teachings of Christ. They clung to the dead forms, and turned away from the living truth and the power of God. {DA 279}

Extra material

“Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his Reason.” Martin Luther.

Many Christians support their beliefs by denying that faith can or should be logical or reasonable. Some even take it so far as to express the idea that faith is by nature irrational, and that the fact that beliefs do not make sense to the logical mind is proof of their truthfulness. The cry that “religion shouldn't make any sense” may not always be said so clearly, but is often inherently expressed in pious platitudes that suggest that matters of faith are beyond our minds and comprehension. Beliefs are just not meant to be reasonable.

Some have said it very bluntly, especially Luther, the great Protestant reformer. His attack on reason is amazing: “Reason is the Devil's greatest whore; by nature and in manner of being she is a noxious whore; she is a prostitute, the Devil's appointed whore; whore eaten by scab and leprosy who ought to be trodden under foot and destroyed, she and her wisdom.” “Reason is contrary to faith. Reason is the whore of the Devil. It can only blaspheme and dishonor everything God has said or done.”

Such a position well illustrates the antagonism some Christians have for any attempt to place faith under scrutiny. This kind of hostility may perhaps come from a desire to protect the valued aspects of faith, to make sure that what brings such meaning and assurance to life is not compromised in any way. But to try to remove Christian beliefs from discussion, to say that they have to be merely accepted with no discussion or examination as to their truthfulness, is a reckless rejection of the God-given gift of reason. For how else can we decide what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false?

5. Confrontation in Galilee

Biblical material: Mark 6:1-56, 7:1-23.

Quotes:

- The lust for power, for dominating others, inflames the heart more than any other passion. *Tacitus*
- I have never been able to conceive how any rational being could propose happiness to himself from the exercise of power over others. *Thomas Jefferson*
- The strength and power of despotism consists wholly in the fear of resistance. *Thomas Paine*
- We should always be disposed to believe that that which appears white is really black, if the hierarchy of the Church so decides. *Ignatius of Loyola*
- A religion which requires persecution to sustain it is of the devil's propagation. *Hosea Ballou*

Introductory questions

Why did Jesus refuse to be crowned king? What does this tell us of the nature of his kingdom? What are the sources of confrontation that Jesus faced? Why is the issue of power and control so important in religion? How should we react to confrontation ourselves? What do we have to say about the “health-wealth gospel”? What about Jesus comments to the woman?

Discussion ideas

Jesus is not respected in his home town because the people think they know him. Just a local boy—they know his family etc. So Jesus is rejected because they refuse to examine the evidence, relying on their preconceived ideas of who he is and where he came from. Jesus, as a result, is unable to help them, because they don't want to know.

Mark then records the death of John, killed because of squalid reasons. Once again evil triumphs in perversity... Jesus' own life is under such a threat, because of his truth-telling.

The feeding of the five thousand (plus!) should have brought a different kind of response. Instead the religious leaders are incensed and hostile, the common people just want a free meal, and the radicals want him to lead the revolution. No one wants to hear his message; rather they just want the material advantages. Jesus refuses to be exploited, and retreats, knowing that this will cost him popular support. Yet he is not interested in a popularity campaign, for he is come to reveal the truth rather than win earthly power or influence.

So he refuses kingship, for this is not his way. When Pilate asks him during the trial “So you are a king then?” Jesus reveals a very different kind of kingdom. In fact, throughout his parables Jesus has been continually speaking of the different values of his kingdom. He is interested in winning trusting souls for eternity.

“It's a scary thought (and it should be) that Jesus spent so much of His time fighting, not against pagans, or skeptics, or agnostics, but against very religious people who believed that they were defending their faith.” Thursday's lesson.

Uncleanness, disobeying rules, blaspheming God—that is what Jesus is accused of. A tragic blindness when God is before them.

Footnote: Did Jesus really identify the Syro-Phoenician women with dogs? What did he mean? What should we understand by this conversation?

Ellen White Comments

Unbelief was taking possession of their minds and hearts. Love of honor had blinded them. . . . Would Christ never assert His authority as king? Why did not He who possessed such power reveal Himself in His true character, and make their way less painful? Why had He not saved John the Baptist from a violent death? Thus the disciples reasoned until they brought upon themselves great spiritual darkness. They questioned, Could Jesus be an impostor, as the Pharisees asserted? {CC 290.3}

Christ was not exclusive, and He had given special offense to the Pharisees by departing in this respect from their rigid rules. He found the domain of religion fenced in by high walls of seclusion, as too sacred a matter for everyday life. These walls of partition He overthrew... He inculcated the principle that Bible religion does not consist in the mortification of the body. He taught that pure and undefiled religion is not meant only for set times and special occasions. At all times and in all places He manifested a loving interest in men, and shed about Him the light of a cheerful piety. All this was a rebuke to the Pharisees. It showed that religion does not consist in selfishness, and that their morbid devotion to personal interest was far from being true godliness. This had roused their enmity against Jesus, so that they tried to enforce His conformity to their regulations. {DA 86}

If Christ had called attention to the Pharisees, and had extolled their learning and piety, they would have hailed Him with joy. But when He spoke of the kingdom of heaven as a dispensation of mercy for all mankind, He was presenting a phase of religion they would not tolerate. Their own example and teaching had never been such as to make the service of God seem desirable. When they saw Jesus giving attention to the very ones they hated and repulsed, it stirred up the worst passions of their proud hearts. {DA 243}

The disciples thought of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. They had wondered why Jesus, with the power to perform wonderful miracles, had permitted John to languish in prison, and to die a violent death. Possessing such power, why did not Christ save John's life? This question had often been asked by the Pharisees, who presented it as an unanswerable argument against Christ's claim to be the Son of God. The Saviour had warned His disciples of trials, losses, and persecution. Would He forsake them in trial? Some questioned if they had mistaken His mission. All were deeply troubled. {DA 526}

Extra material

More than anything else, Jesus asked for careful consideration of his message, for investigation and understanding. All his words and actions are full of meaning, explanations of the spiritual realm through parables and illustrations. Jesus has nothing to do with blind faith—in fact he categorically rejects blind guides. He seeks for our understanding, our realization of our need, and our assent to his answers. This is no irrational faith—it is based on the truth Jesus came to reveal at such incredible cost, the evidence provided by God Himself.

As Christians we are called to give an evidence for our faith, a reason for the hope that is in us. (1 Peter 3:15). This is not the product of fanciful tales or “cunningly devised fables,” (2 Peter 1:16), nor are we swept about by every passing “wind of doctrine.” (Ephesians 4:14). We use God's great gift of thought to explore in our own limited ways the mind of the infinite, for we are made in the image of God in our minds also. For God is a God of freedom, of choice, of demonstration, not some pagan perversion of a fickle god who acts randomly and at whim.

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5). For “we have the mind of Christ.” (2 Cor. 4:16 NIV). Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5)—not an irrational mind that operated without logic and meaning, but one full of investigation, of analysis, of the careful weighing of the evidence.

God is a God of order, of purpose—a God who is not illogical, but one who admires thoughtful consideration and invites our investigation. How foolish to throw all that away for some fanciful ideas of faith that have no basis in reality.