

The Gospel Bulldozer

Pastor Chris Baker //04.23.23 // Centralia FBC

Good morning, church! Our plan was originally to have a guest with us to preach this morning, but circumstances arose that were beyond our control and so we will push forward with our series in Mark's gospel today.

On the fourth and fifth Sundays our kindergarten through third graders who normally go to children's church will be staying with us during the sermon. Kids and parents, there are some sermon note sheets floating around. It's our hope that those will help you kids understand as we study and it will give you parents some ideas about how to follow up on the sermon or have deeper discussions at home.

I think the most helpful part of that sheet for you is there at the bottom where it says 'something I didn't understand' and 'something I learned.' Kids, if I say something you don't understand then write that down and ask your parents or grandparents or whoever brought you today about it later. If you learn something, write that down, too, and talk about it later.

When we gave this out last month, I wasn't as clear as I could have been about the instructions. I got a message from a parent on that Sunday afternoon with a picture of their child's note sheet. Apparently, this child thought they were supposed to grade my sermon. Under the 'notes' section, my helpful friend wrote: "I like your stories, Chris. It was a little boring for me, but I don't know how to fix it."

I appreciate the honest feedback. Maybe the note sheet will be helpful to you, or maybe it'll just be good for a laugh.

We looked at the big picture of Mark's gospel last week. We saw the finished product in what Mark is trying to teach us about Jesus. He's the servant who came to save.

My boys love Legos. When you buy a box of Legos the picture is the finished product. But when you open the box, it's not the finished product. It's all the building blocks. And to get to the finished product you have to start somewhere. Mark starts in an interesting place.

Let's read together from Mark 1:1.

Read

Pray

Scientists will tell you we have four seasons: summer, fall, winter, and spring. According to the calendar we are one month into spring, but the forecasted low for today was 30 and a freeze warning expired about an hour ago.

That makes me believe a post I saw on social media this week alleging Missouri has 13 seasons: winter, fool's spring, 2nd winter, spring of deception, 3rd winter (we are here), tornado season, summer, road construction, sweat, fall, just kidding still summer, 4 days of actual fall, Christmas.

That may be exaggerating just a little bit, but I have learned there are certain realities that come with the different seasons now that we've lived here a little over 5 years. This week I realized we are at the time of the year when all of our farmers try to decide who can make their field smell the worst for the longest distance—and some of ya'll are killing it.

I don't know agriculture well, but I do know that the stench is part of the preparation of the ground for planting season.

Mark writes that his gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, but to understand it you don't start there. You start with a man called John the Baptist. And the way Mark frames John's story for us, his purpose is the same as that fertilizer. Not to smell bad, though based on the description he just might have. No, his purpose was to prepare the ground.

Ray Stedman, who pastored faithfully in California for four decades prior to his death in 1992, understood John as the man who worked the ground for Jesus. He said this:

(T)he prophet Isaiah said John's message would be like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert for God to come to the isolated stranger in the midst of the wilderness. Without a road you cannot drive out into the desert in order to help somebody. You must have a road, a highway in the desert. John was God's bulldozer to build that highway. You know how roads are built -- exactly as Isaiah describes in Chapter 40. "Every mountain shall be brought low, and every valley shall be lifted up; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain," (Isaiah 40:4a). That is what repentance does. It brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on and refuse to admit are wrong. It takes the depressed areas of our life, where we beat and torture and punish ourselves, and lifts them up. It takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, and straightens them out. And it makes the rough places plain. Then God is there, at that instant of repentance. Beautiful imagery, is it not?

(<https://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/the-place-to-begin>)

To build a road, you do as much as you can to level out the terrain. Massive machines relocate dirt from the highest peak to the lowest valley and they smooth out the soil. John's ministry, foretold by Isaiah generations earlier, was intended to prepare the hearts of the people for the Messiah.

In Mark's mind, to understand Jesus you have to start with John. So that's what we'll do today. We'll learn four gospel patterns from John's story. Each of these patterns are repeated at various points in Mark's gospel, so he's using this opening scene to accomplish two things. First, he establishes the shape of the gospel for us. Just like prior to a road being paved, you'll be able to see where it's headed based on the dirt work. Mark lay out the shape of the gospel using John the Baptist as an illustration. Second, He teaches us important truths about the main character of the story—Jesus Himself. And as we see each of these gospel patterns we'll find application for our lives today.

Four patterns of the gospel revealed in John

The first pattern is gospel foundation.

Gospel foundation (v.1-4)

The book itself begins like this: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That's the truth that bookends our text for today, actually. It's in verse 1 and verse 11. We're going to mostly be focused on John but let's not miss this. Mark fully believed Jesus is God and Jesus is the Son of God. Because a lot of us have been in church for a while, we read right past that but it's a profound statement. In fact, that's the claim that ultimately got Jesus killed.

Jesus is not God's son in the human sense—God the Father didn't get married and have son with Mary. Jesus is God son in the sense that He is God manifesto in human form. John 1 tells us In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1) and The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (1:14)

Jesus is not God's Son in the sense of a human father and a son. God did not get married and have a son. God did not mate with Mary and, together with her, produce a son. Jesus is God's Son in the sense that He is God made manifest in human form (John 1:1, 14). Jesus is God's Son in that He was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:35 declares, "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'"

To be the Son of God is to be of the same nature as God. The Son of God is God. The Jewish leaders understood that well, that's why they were so infuriated that at Jesus. He claimed to be God. And that led to His execution.

The truth that Jesus the Messiah is God made flesh is not a new truth, according to Mark. The whole Old Testament points to it. He calls the prophets Malachi and Isaiah to make his case for him in verse 3. Mark identifies John as the one who will cry out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Messiah.

John's ministry laid the foundation for Jesus, but the important truth for us to notice here is that John didn't write the blueprint, so to speak. This message isn't John's message. It's the message of Isaiah, it's the message of Malachi, there are elements of in these first few verses of Mark 1 that go all the way back to Genesis, church. It's no accident the opening verses of Mark echo the opening verses of Genesis 1. In the beginning God—the beginning of the gospel of Jesus. God uses John in the wilderness to purify His people in the same way He used the wilderness to purify Israel in the Exodus.

John's message is the message of the Old Testament. John is the first prophet we meet in the New Testament but you could say he's the last prophet of the Old Testament. John's gospel is not his gospel. It's God's gospel.

John didn't make up his message. He didn't pick and choose what truths to share. His message was pretty offensive at face-value. He didn't limit his gospel to the things he thought the people would receive well. That's the illustration. Here's the application: Church, we have the same gospel.

Listen to Jude (1:3)

Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write, appealing to you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all.

The foundation of John's gospel is the same as the foundation for the gospel we are saved by today, the gospel we live by today. It's a faith that was delivered from God to His people once for all.

John's message was a gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins followed by a public declaration of that repentance we call baptism. And that's the same message we preach today.

That's the message. We don't get to change it, we don't get to take the parts we like and leave the rest. It is given to us and, as we'll see in Mark, we are to both live it out and serve others by spreading it. That's the second gospel pattern we see in Mark 1. Gospel character. Look at verse 5:

Gospel character (v.5-6)

5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

I don't know about you, but as I have heard John the Baptist preached over the years and thought about him myself, I think there's a tendency to camp on the camel-hair shirt and weird paleo diet and think this was a crazy sidewalk preacher.

My earliest memory of hearing preaching came at a church in Newport, TN where my uncle was the pastor. We didn't go to church regularly until I was a teenager when we found a great church in our town. But we showed up to his church every now and then when I was little. And this was a very country church in a very Appalachian environment. And his preaching was angry. I was scared of church when I was young because I all remembered was him yelling about how people were going to hell.

That might be the picture you have of John. But if that was his message at the time, nobody would have left Jerusalem to hear it.

Mark tells us that his message was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Something drew these people out of all these cities and brought them down into this desert area. John was sharing good news and people were drawn to it.

And he wasn't making a fashion statement. He dressed that way on purpose, most likely to match the description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8 because Elijah called the nation to repentance.

John's dress and message were a protest against people of his day. It amounted to a call to separate themselves from the sinful culture, repent, and live a life focused on God.

What was beautiful was that John's life and actions bore out what he was. He didn't just like the gospel. He didn't just support the gospel. He spoke it and lived it. It wasn't his gospel. It was God's gospel.

(Hughes, R. Kent. Mark (2 volumes in 1 / ESV Edition) (Preaching the Word) (pp. 20-21). Crossway. Kindle Edition.)

The message made the man, the man didn't make the message. That is the gospel character we see laid down as a pattern for us. The question we're forced to ask by way of application is this: does that gospel drive your life like it drove John's? That doesn't mean you're supposed to go out and live in the woods

and eat locusts. But it does mean that living for God should be nothing less than the reason you get out of bed every morning.

Character has been described as who you are and what you do when nobody is looking. That doesn't work great for Christians because we know that God is always looking. So does who we are revealed to be by the gospel drive everything that we do?

The gospel defined John. Does it define you? Do the kids at school know you're a Christian? Everyone knew John was different because of how he lived and what he said. Do they know that about you? What about the people at work? How about your neighbors? What kind of gospel character has your life taught your family?

The application isn't do nice things or be a good person, by the way. Verse 5 tells us people were confessing their sins and being baptized because of John's ministry in their lives. No one ever came and asked to be baptized because they saw you picking up sticks in someone's yard or delivering food to them. Those are awesome things and they're implications of the gospel and we should very much do them, but we HAVE to call sinners to repentance as a regular part of our personal ministry if we're going to see change around us, church. John did. That's how the gospel shaped his character.

The gospel also set his direction. Verse 7:

Gospel direction (7-8)

He proclaimed, "One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This is an outgrowth of the character piece. What is in your heart is what will be on your lips. John's ministry doesn't point to himself. He doesn't do it to make a name for John. He does it to make a name for Jesus. Everything John did was about Jesus.

There's a Christian releasing this week about the life of George Foreman, the former boxing champion. His testimony is powerful, but before he became a Christian he was involved in the largest boxing match in history at the time.

In 1974 Foreman fought Muhammad Ali in Zaire. It was promoted as "The Rumble in the Jungle." It was more than a boxing event, there was a music festival featuring James Brown and BB King, and it did great things for tourism in the relatively small country.

The poster is iconic. It's yellow and green and of course it has images of the two great boxers. But down at the bottom in the right-hand corner. The last name on the poster, he's the one that made it all come together.

Don King. He was the promoter. It wasn't about him. He wasn't a fighter, but he laid all the groundwork. Later he became a weird kind of celebrity himself, but originally he was just a promoter. Someone who put other people's names much higher on the poster than his own.

That's John. Everything he did was to make much of Jesus. One who is more powerful than me is coming. He's the one you need. I just have water, He's bringing the Holy Spirit. Water makes you clean for a day, the Holy Spirit makes you clean forever.

Church, we've been baptized in the Holy Spirit according to what John says here. Listen to what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:22

22 He has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment.

The seal means we belong to Him. And our job, like John's is to point others to Him and when we do we will see gospel confirmation. It's incredible for John. We see it in verse 9:

Gospel confirmation (9-11)

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. 10 As soon as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased."

Wait, why did Jesus need to be baptized? Mark doesn't camp there, but Matthew did. In Matthew's account, John says I need to be baptized by you, not the other way around. But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' (Matthew 3:14, 15).

Because Jesus was sinless, he didn't need baptism that signified repentance. But in his baptism he associated himself with us sinners and placed himself among the guilty—not for his own salvation but for ours—not for his guilt but for ours—not because he feared the wrath to come but to save us from it.

(Hughes, R. Kent. Mark (2 volumes in 1 / ESV Edition) (Preaching the Word) (p. 24). Crossway. Kindle Edition.)

For John (and for us in a few ways that we see and in a million ways we don't) obedience is followed by affirmation.

John was obedient. Jesus was obedient. And then we get this incredible live action display of the Trinity. The Son is baptized, the Spirit descends and the Father speaks. Church, when God's people are obedience God responds. You won't always see it as clearly as John does here, but God is always at work and He's especially at work when His people are obedient.

Is He at work in you?

Maybe you've been coming here for a while. You're comforted by the songs and maybe by the preaching sometimes. I hope you feel welcome by our church family. You might leave here feeling better about yourself. You made it to church this week so you're going to feel closer to God on Monday morning than you would have otherwise and that's awesome. I'm glad you're here. We'll always be glad you're here.

But don't miss John's message. The very first gospel confirmation you'll notice happens when you hear John's message of repentance and baptism and respond. John's message is actually echoed by Peter after he preached at Pentecost in Acts 2:37:

37 When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Going to church is good. We're called to be here together. But like John, you know, we're here to point one another away from ourselves to the One you really need.

Thousands of people came to see John at the Jordan. Only a few followed Jesus.

It would be a terrible tragedy if, as you come out to church, you fail to come to Jesus.

I really appreciate how Presbyterian pastor David Strain described John and his message. He said John is like an alarm clock, a news anchor, and a flashlight.

The alarm is sounding. You have a sin problem and there's only one person in all the universe who can deal with it. Not you and not me, but Jesus Christ. John was announcing the good news. "He's come! He's available! You can take Him for yourself!" And then He began to shine the light upon Him and said, "Look there. Turn there. Go there. He can do, only He can do what you need. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved but the name of Jesus Christ."

So John is a news anchor. We have good news in the light of which nothing can be the same again. Jesus is the true Israel who would accomplish in our place the new exodus by His perfect obedience. And He is the Lord, returning to dwell in His temple, to dwell in the midst of His people, to restore us to fellowship with Himself. Jesus is our Rescuer. And John is an alarm clock calling us all to wake up. It's time to get real and deal with our sin. And he is a flashlight, pointing to the only One who can ever really deal with it, the Lord Jesus. Are you trusting in Christ? Are you hearing the good news and responding to the alarm that is sounding and turning all your attention not on the external forms but on the means, but on the Savior to which the forms and the means, the preaching and the church, the Savior to which they all point? Are you looking to Christ?

Ray Stedman called John the gospel bulldozer. Is your life marked by a pattern of gospel foundation, character, direction, and confirmation? Church, what reshaping work has God done in your heart today through John's ministry? John's message requires an urgent response. Let's pray about it and then you'll have the opportunity to respond.