

Receiving God's Greatest Gift

Mark 1:1-4

By [Rev. Billy Dempsey](#)

Let me ask you to open your Bibles if you will to Mark chapter 1. We'll give our attention this day to verses 1 through 4, the beginning of Mark's gospel. And before we do so, let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, You have made it plain that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from Your mouth, and so we come to You, hungry. Feed us now; feed our hungry souls; nourish our hearts; let us see the truth; shape us by it, and make us look like Christ. That is our prayer; that is our plea. We stand before Your Word now, in Jesus' name. Amen.

From Mark chapter 1 verses 1 through 4:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the Word of God stands forever.

Last Lord's Day, Ligon took us to Matthew chapter 1 to the narrative where Joseph hears for the first time the message of the angel concerning the child that Mary, his betrothed, was carrying. And he heard then what Ligon pointed out to us last week, of God's greatest gifts, the gift, the most important gift - the gift of forgiveness of sins, the one we need the most. And he heard about the gift that we ought to want the most — the gift of fellowship with God. Remember, the angel told Joseph, "You will call His name Jesus, for He will forgive His people of their sins and save His people from their sins." And the word, Immanuel, was reminded to Joseph. The coming of Immanuel, "God with us" - the forgiveness of our sins and fellowship with God. The question really that Mark faces us here with in chapter 1, at the very beginning, is — How do we receive God's greatest gifts? You'll be excited when I tell you that the answer is one word. You'll be excited because you'll think it will be a very short sermon and you can go home quickly. It is one word, but let me draw a picture first. Preachers are always

drawing pictures, but let me draw a picture first.

I'm moving. I'm moving into the house we bought and so I'm thinking about houses and furniture and all those things. I want to give you a new house. I want to give you a new house full of new furniture and all the stuff that's required for you to live and operate every day. All brand new. All just out of the package. All at no cost to you. All you have to do is move in. and you can say, "Thank you very much, preacher, that's wonderful — appreciate that." But you haven't received my gift until you have left your old house and all your old furniture and all of your old stuff and take up residence in the new house. When you've done that, you have actively received the gift I have given you. If we're going to receive gifts from God, it works the same way. The one word that describes how we receive God's greatest gifts is repentance — to turn away from, to leave behind, to change one's mind, and by changing one's mind to change one's whole manner of life. That's the message of John — repentance.

REPENTANCE: THE MESSAGE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Let's talk about the purpose of his message and then we'll talk about the meaning of his message and the point of his message to us today. The purpose of John's message — God has been silent in the nation of Israel and in terms of speaking to His people for 400 long years. Malachi, the last prophet through whom God sent His word, Malachi preached about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the 400's B.C. God has not spoken through a prophet for 400 years. John Calvin helps us understand why God might have been silent. You would think, "God, these are Your people and events are building — why be quiet? Don't you need to speak?" And Calvin maybe helps us understand. Let me read this quote: "In order to inflame the minds of His people with a stronger desire of the promised salvation, the Lord has determined to leave them for a time without new prophecies."

Well, we find evidence of that being the case, certainly in Malachi chapter 3, which John refers to. We'll talk about that in just a second. John refers to Malachi chapter 3 and the whole verse, Malachi 3:1, refers to "the Lord whom you seek and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight." God is withholding revelation. Not that they needed more — God had already said everything that needed to be said. He's withholding the voice, His voice, the voice of His truth, until such time as the fullness of time had come. In the meantime, they long, they seek, they yearn for the Messiah to come. We certainly see it with Simeon, don't we? As Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus for His purification rites in the temple, there is Simeon and he says, "Now I can depart in peace." Why? "Because I've seen the consolation of Israel. I've seen the one You've promised." Simeon was longing for Messiah to come. We see it with Anna, who rejoiced to see the infant Jesus at the same time, at the same context, and Luke tells us that she went to tell all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. Anna knew

there were people counting the days looking for Messiah. "Is He here? Is He there? When's He coming? We need Him so badly!" We can even see evidence among the Gentiles, don't we? Longing, looking for Messiah's coming. The wise men. They came from the East, they came from Persia where God had sent His people into exile many, many years before. And in that exile they planted the seed of the hope of their ultimate deliverance. They let their captors know, "We look for a day when Messiah comes. We look for a day when the Promised One, the Holy One of Israel, comes." Those Gentiles looked for that same truth. They looked for that same arrival. When the star in the East made its appearance, they knew what star they were looking at and they came to worship Him in Bethlehem. They were looking. I think God's planned worked. People were inflamed. Minds and hearts were inflamed, ready to find Messiah.

You know it's against that backdrop that Mark uses the word, "appears." God appears. It's almost like He bursts forth. He's suddenly there with an electrifying message of preparation. It's a message that's so powerful that thousands came from all over Judea to the wilderness, not some cushy stadium and not to some nice sanctuary, but to the wilderness, to the rock-strewn wilderness along the banks of the Jordan to hear John's message of preparation, John's message of "Clear Away the Obstacles." We'll talk about those in a moment. A message so powerful that they began to ask, "Are you the Messiah? Are you the one we were waiting for? Are you the one? Are you the Holy One?" It's as though God's long silence and sudden sending of John as the forerunner is saying, "Here He comes! Don't miss it! Get ready for Him! He's about to be here! Don't be late!"

What the meaning of John's message? First of all, let me go back and say something right here, just by way of clarification, not that it's my part to clarify Mark at all, but look at verse 2. Mark says, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet," and what he says right there, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face" — that's a quote from Malachi. People who are looking to find a reason to say the Bible doesn't know what it's talking about will look at that and say, "See, he says it's going to be Isaiah but his first quote is Malachi; Isaiah comes in verse 3 so why didn't he list Malachi?" Let's just give Mark credit for being a good citer of sources. There's an old rabbinic rule. When citing two prophets, you cite, you give the citation to the greater prophet. Isaiah's the greater prophet. Mark knew what he was doing. I just pass that on to you as one little piece of ammunition when you find people shooting holes in faith in the Scriptures. There's a reason why that happens the way it does.

Let's talk about the meaning of the message. Look at verse 4. "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Let's understand that baptism was familiar to the Jews. It was not an unfamiliar idea, and unfamiliar rite. They were accustomed to ceremonial washings involved in daily living and certainly in their worship. They were accustomed to the concept of sin and defilement and the need for cleansing. They were accustomed to the notion of baptizing Gentile converts into

Judaism. The males had to be circumcised but all Gentiles who converted from their pagan religion to Judaism also had to be baptized. It's precisely because of that notion of cleansing from defilement outside the covenant community. That's not what John is talking about. John is talking to sweet hearted Jewish people. John is talking to people who go to temple. John is talking to people who know the Law. John is saying they are defiled. John is saying they need cleansing. John is saying their hearts need purifying. John is saying to them, specifically to the Pharisees — but if you look in Luke chapter 3 he's addressing the whole crowd. And he says, "Don't say you've got Abraham for your father. God can raise from these stones children for Abraham." He's saying, "Don't count on your DNA! Your DNA's not going to save you. Your heritage is not going to save you. The issue is your heart, and your heart as a people," John is saying, "is not ready to meet Messiah, Messiah who's coming. Your heart is not ready."

OBSTACLES

Think for a second about what some of those heart issues might be, about what some of those heart obstructions might be. Certainly there's wickedness, there's wickedness in all of us. There's wickedness in that culture too — open, unrepented of sin. John is certainly fingering that and saying, "Repent, repent, the kingdom of heaven is coming near!" Could it be also that John is calling them to repent of their righteousness? Is that possible? How do you repent of righteousness or why would you do so? We need to understand that the Pharisees have put much stock for several generations in obedience to the Law and the righteousness that comes through obedience, the importance of obedience. And they have built for themselves a reputation as a sect, as a people who are encouraging of and who are exemplary of obedience and public righteousness. They missed, perhaps, the impact, the application of Isaiah 64 verse 6 where God says to His people that "even your righteousness is as filthy rags." They missed that part. They missed that concept of "God washed my tears that my tears of repentance may be clean." They missed the fact that sin has saturated every portion and part, every particle of their being so that even their good deeds, even their righteous acts, even their acts of kindness and obedience are stained and ruined. And they cannot point to them before a God who is holy and righteous and perfect and say, "See, I've done that. Aren't you happy?" because you'll never be happy in those things. They are the pile of filthy rags that He turns from in disgust. There is no hope for them. God is saying, "Repent even of your righteousness."

I think another obstacle that John would be pointing to — Jesus, as you look through the gospels, He points to this among His disciples repeatedly. The obstacle of unbelief. Unbelief. Maybe there's unbelief in John's audience because God has tarried long in sending Messiah and they've just thought, "Well, it doesn't matter. It's just a myth; it's just a symbol. We're left here to make our own way." Maybe there's unbelief in that capacity. Well I think those are three

things that John is pointing to as obstacles to clear the path of Messiah as He comes — wickedness, righteousness, a trust in righteousness, a confidence in our own righteousness, and unbelief.

How do we see unbelief? It's kind of a strange thing. I think we see unbelief as it demonstrates itself in a spiritual apathy, a spiritual lethargy. We're inattentive to the means of grace. We fail to see the benefit or the usefulness or the good of spending time in God's Word. We've got so many places to be and so many things to do and just don't have time and are just too tired to get up a little bit early and have any kind of meaningful time in God's Word. Maybe there's an inattentiveness to spiritual things. We're in the presence of all kinds of spiritual activities and spiritual opportunities and well maybe we're just kind of inattentive. Maybe we're even there. Maybe we're even in place and just not aware, not aware. Maybe there's a certain hardness of heart, a certain unwillingness to really recognize the importance of the things of God in a world like ours. I think those are maybe — in a world like theirs, certainly in a world like ours — unbelief as we experience it.

That kind of moves me to the point of the message. What are the things, if John were here today — would he preach a different message? I don't think so. Let's remember that we live in the parenthesis of time. John is preaching as Jesus is about Himself to burst onto the scene and become the talk of the nation in the three years of His public ministry. That will be culminated in His death, His resurrection from the dead, and His ascension. We live in that time in which we await His return. And the question becomes, "Are we ready? Are we prepared? Have we taken advantage of emptying our hands, of turning away from everything we would cling to, and making ourselves ready to receive those two fantastic gifts that God offers — forgiveness of our sin and fellowship with Him — so that at His return we're ready to meet Him? That's really the time that we're in. We're in the time of anticipating His return; yes, we're anticipating Christmas, but we're really anticipating His return. Are we ready? If He comes before we get to Sunday dinner are we ready to meet Him? Have we emptied our hands, have we emptied our hearts of everything that is an obstruction, an obstacle, a distraction? And are we ready to receive, have we received, do we regularly take advantage of the benefits, the gifts that He has given to us — forgiveness of sin and fellowship with Himself?

Let's talk about what John would say to us. What are the obstacles as he would preach to us? What's our wickedness? Well, we have a long list. We don't have enough time to talk about my wickedness much less yours, but let's talk about one that sneaks up on us and gets by without our thinking about it. What about idolatry? Idolatry is our finding meaning and satisfaction and hope and a reason for living in anything, in anyone besides God Himself, in His truth, and His ways. Where do we find our meaning and hope and our reason for living in apart from God? Could it be work? It certainly could be. Could it be family? Could it be possessions? Could it be status? Comfort? That guy? That girl? Those grades?

Entertainment? Someone had the effrontery from the 8:30 service to say, “Maybe you ought to add college football to that list of things that we're idolatrous about!” I couldn't believe it. Not here, not here in Jackson. What is it that gives our lives meaning that we tend to put our hope and our confidence in? If we're not careful, they're there and we have to look for them because our hearts are naturally little idol factories and we look for anything besides God Himself to worship. We're worshiping beings and we're going to worship. We're going to worship God or we're going to worship anything else. Are we worshiping anything else? Are we finding our meaning, our living, our truth, our frame of reference anywhere besides God?

What about this — what about if not idolatry, what about unforgiveness? There's one that sneaks up on us. What about unforgiveness? What about something that we hold and we cherish and we nourish a grudge, a bad feeling, against a group, a person, an employer, a spouse, a child, a parent, a friend, a former friend? We nourish this sense of having been wronged and having been hurt and we're justified in all our anger. Are we holding onto something that is an obstacle to receiving the best gifts God has to offer? We repent of it, we drop it, we turn away from it, we ask Him to forgive us and we move forward. You know it's interesting that Jesus said, as He taught us how to pray in Matthew chapter 6, the only petition He explained was the petition regarding forgive, forgiveness. He said, “If you can't forgive, you don't know what it is to be forgiven. You can't forgive — if you won't forgive, how do you expect to experience God's forgiveness?” Is unforgiveness an obstacle that we hold on to that mars the way of Messiah as He advances in our life?

What about unbelief? That's a sneaky one. That's a sneaky one. We're here because we believe. Do we believe when we get up in the morning and go to work or do we put our secular garments on? “I've got to fight the fight the way the world does to make a buck in this world. I've got to fight the fight the way the world does. I've got to be just as dirty. I've got to be ahead of them. I've got to be just as sneaky.” Do we believe? And in believing, do we let the truth of God dictate how we live and how we operate and how we do our business and how we respond to our family and how we raise our children, how we spend our money, how we spend our time? Do we believe that God's ways are the best ways, the right ways, the ways we were made for? Do we believe that all truth is God's truth and He is represented and found — His fingerprints in all of life, in all places of life, all facets of life, and His fingerprints are there that He might receive glory from us as we walk through all those places? Does belief shape everything we do and everything we are? That's belief. Unbelief chips away at all of that foundation. Unbelief shreds it bit by bit. “Oh, it doesn't really matter. Oh, you've got to go along to get along. Oh, you've just got to get by. It's all about getting by, preacher. You don't understand.” I understand what unbelief does to us. I understand the poison that it is. I understand how it rots our faith from the inside out. And so we become hollow men and hollow women, hollow young people with an appearance of faith and not much else.

John would call us to repent, to throw it aside. John would call us to turn our back on it and prepare to receive again those great gifts of God that we need not just once but every day — forgiveness of sin and fellowship with Him. So repentance is not just a one-time event as John would tell us, it's a lifestyle, because every day I see what I've trusted in besides the Lord God Himself. Every day I see what my wickedness is. Every day I see what my unbelief is and again, anew and afresh, we repent, clear out the obstacles, and make ready the highway of the King in our hearts, in our lives, in our living. Every day

How do we receive God's gifts? We turn our back on everything else. We change our mind and our life about everything else and we go to God empty handed, "Give me, Sir, what I need the most. Give me, Father, what I want the most, because without those I have nothing." I hope that's your heart. If not, it can be. By praying that simple prayer, that simple prayer, we enjoy those gifts that God gives.

Let me ask you to stand and let's go to the Lord together in prayer.

Father, thank You for speaking Your truth through John. Thank You for speaking Your truth every day into our hearts and lives. Thank You for recognizing us for who we are — a needy people who can be wrong-headed about all the right things, a needy people who needs to clear those obstacles. And thank You that You make that way possible. Give us that gift of repentance, not just once, not just twice, but every day, so that every day we might enjoy sweeter and more intimate walking and knowing of You through Your Son, the Lord Jesus, as we pray in His name. And all God's people said, amen.

Our hymn is number 193, our carol of response, "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence."

Now let me ask you to look up to receive the blessing of God. Now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, may the Lord Himself lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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