BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studied In

The Gospel of Mark: People Responding to Jesus

Lesson Two

Peter: Telling Jesus He’s Wrong

Focal Text
Mark 1:16-18; 8:27-33; 14:26-31, 66-72; 16:5-7

Background

Main Idea
Even though Peter was a determined follower of Jesus, Peter still told Jesus more than once that Jesus was wrong.

Question to Explore
In what ways are you telling Jesus he’s wrong?

Quick Read
When we reject God’s will and help, we inevitably fail our Lord.

Commentary
Our culture measures success by the three Ps: possessions, performance, and popularity. God measures success by obedience.

Jesus began his public ministry by calling on people to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17). He taught us to “seek first his kingdom” (Matt. 6:33) and to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt.
6:10). When he returns, his name will be “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16).

If God is our advisor, we obey him when his advice seems best to us. If God is our King, we obey him whether we want to or not. Would God say he was King of your life yesterday? Will he be your King today?

As we follow Jesus’ ministry with individuals through the Gospel of Mark, today we come to one of the great enigmas in Scripture. Our subject was capable of the highest heroism in following his Lord, and of the lowest cowardice in denying him. His story is in the biblical text, not for his sake but for ours. As Mark’s Gospel was likely based on Peter’s witness, it seems that the apostle wanted us to know his story, failures and all, so we could learn from his example.

One of the life principles we’ll explore this week is God’s personal revelation for you and for your class. As we begin, let’s resolve that Jesus will be more our King at the end of our study than he is now.

**Leave everything for Jesus (1:16-18)**

Last week we watched Jesus begin his ministry by submitting to John’s baptism in the Jordan River. Mark’s account moves immediately to events “after John was put in prison” (Mark 1:14), a reference that is meant to notify us that the writer will fast-forward in Jesus’ ministry to the day he called his disciples into full-time commitment.

The other Gospels fill in the events omitted by Mark:

- Jesus called his first disciples (John 1:35-51), although their decision at this time did not require them to leave their jobs.
- He turned water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-12).
- He cleansed the temple for the first time (John 2:13-25).
- He met with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21).
- Jesus discussed John the Baptist’s ministry (John 3:22-36).
- He was rejected by his hometown (Luke 4:16-30; Matt. 4:13-16).
- He relocated to Capernaum (Matt. 4:13-17).

As you can see, Jesus’ call to Peter, Andrew, James and John in our text was not his first meeting with these men. However, it was a challenging, bold call to unconditional obedience and commitment.
Our text begins: “As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen” (Mark 1:16). He was “walking” (paragon, or passing by, moving along) on the northern shoreline of the “Sea of Galilee.” This body of water is called Kinnereth (meaning harp) in Hebrew, as it is in the rough shape of a harp. It was also called the Lake of Gennesaret and the Sea of Tiberias.

The Sea of Galilee stands almost 700 feet below sea level, and is approximately seven miles wide and thirteen miles long. It is one of the most vibrant bodies of water on earth; its region is able to produce fruit and crops for ten months out of the year and its waters are teeming with fish. I travel to Israel each year, and every time I agree with Josephus that this is an area in which “nature had taken pride” (Wars 3.516-521).

Here our Lord saw “Simon” (meaning sand or sandy), a Greek name that was common among both Jews and Greeks at this time. Jesus would later change his name to “Peter” (meaning rock or rocky).

Peter’s brother was Andrew (the only person by this name in the New Testament). Andrew’s name is also Greek. He and his brother were originally from Bethsaida, a village to the east of Capernaum. According to tradition, Andrew later accompanied Peter on some of his missionary trips.

The two were “casting a net into the lake.” This “net” was the amphiblistron, a circular net with weights on the perimeter and a rope tied to the center; its design is still in use today. The fisherman would row his boat out onto the water and then cast the net with a lasso-like motion. As it descended in the water, the weights caused it to close around the fish it caught; the fisherman would then drag the net and fish into the boat. It is a difficult, tiring way to fish, requiring physical rigor and strength.

Fish from the Sea of Galilee were exported to markets as far away as Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. As a result, Peter and Andrew were engaged in a significant and profitable business. They had formed a partnership with James, John, and their family (Mark 1:19) and had servants (1:20). Peter’s home, as identified by nearly twenty centuries of tradition, was the largest yet discovered in Capernaum and was located nearest the Sea of Galilee. These were not rag-tag peasants but successful businessmen and entrepreneurs. They were among the most visible and significant members of their society.

Our text continues: “‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men’” (1:17). “Come” translates duete, meaning come here! “Follow me” was understood to be an invitation to become the student of a rabbi. In Jesus’ day, students
applied for such prestigious positions; those who were most qualified by academic background and social status were accepted. By contrast, Jesus came directly to these fishermen, inviting them to join him as his full-time students and apprentices. Imagine an Ivy League school that sent admissions counselors into the community, seeking to enlist students.

Our Lord made clear their assignment: he would “make” (poieso, or produce, manufacture) them into “fishers of men.” They had been catching fish—now they would catch people. They would use the same skills: go where the fish are to be found, using methods most appropriate to the fish they were trying to catch, risking their lives in battling the elements, working tirelessly, measuring success not by the size of their boat but by the size of their catch.

Simon and Andrew would have had little question as to his ability to fulfill his promise, for these men had already seen Jesus turn water into wine (John 2:1-12) and had a sense of his miraculous capacities. This must have been a shocking opportunity for them.

However, it came at a great cost: “At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:18). “At once” translates euthys, meaning straightway or immediately. This is one of the signature words and emphases of Mark’s Gospel. Eleven times in Mark 1 and forty times in his Gospel, he used language of immediacy or urgency. The fishermen “followed” (ekolouthesan, or came after, accompanied) Jesus; the term appears outside the Gospels only in Revelation 14:4, where Jesus’ faithful “follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”

The men understood that Jesus’ call now required their full-time, unconditional commitment and obedience. By leaving their nets, they left their vocations and homes. They would form an itinerant band of disciples, traveling wherever Jesus went and doing whatever he said. Imagine the most successful businesspeople in your congregation leaving their vocations to follow a street preacher.

Such is Jesus’ call to anyone who would be his: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Would you be so submitted to your Lord? Are you?

**Follow God’s will when we do not understand it (8:27-33)**

Peter would continue to play a significant role in Mark’s Gospel, as Jesus made his home with Peter’s family (Mark 1:29-34) and named Peter first among his apostles (3:13-19); in fact, this apostle would be named first in every biblical list of the disciples. He also accompanied Jesus, along with James and John, in the healing of Jairus’s daughter (5:35-43).
Our next episode finds the apostle playing a leading role in one of the most significant events in Scripture. It begins: “Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philipi. On the way he asked them, ‘Who do people say I am?’” (8:27).

Caesarea Philippi was rebuilt by Herod the Great; it was named for Caesar Augustus and Philip, the ruler who followed Herod. It was located near the base of Mount Hermon, close to a set of springs that fed into the Jordan River. The disciples had traveled twenty-five miles north of Bethsaida, where Jesus had just healed a blind man (8:22-26).

In Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked the disciples his question. It was more typical for disciples to ask questions of their rabbis, but he wanted to lead them to an important decision and commitment. He had fed the 5,000 and the 4,000, been challenged by the Pharisees, and healed many. His ministry and fame were growing quickly; it was vitally important that the disciples understand his true nature and purpose.

The men responded, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets” (8:28). Jesus and John the Baptist had worked in similar ways. Elijah had been taken to heaven and would return to precede the Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6). The prophets confronted authority and challenged the people to godliness, consistent themes in Jesus’ teaching. What no one was saying, however, was that Jesus was the Messiah.

So Jesus turned the dialogue in a personal direction: “But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ’” (Mark 8:29). This is the first time “Christ” is used in Mark’s Gospel after the introductory verse of the book (1:1). As Matthew records, this revelation was given by God himself (Matt. 16:17). Knowing that this title and office would be misunderstood by the people, “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:30). He “warned” (epitimesen, or rebuked, reproved, censured, commanded) them not to disclose his true identity.

Jesus immediately sought to redefine his calling: “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (8:31). This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus described his future suffering and death. He always connected his death to his resurrection, as here.

From this point forward, Mark’s Gospel focuses largely on Jesus’ path to Jerusalem and the cross. While other teachings and miracles would occur along the way, the narrative’s focus has shifted. Jesus would affirm again the need for secrecy regarding his mission:

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them,
“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it (9:30-32).

Jesus tried to explain his coming suffering a third time in Mark’s Gospel

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise” (10:32-34).

Now we come to the text that continues this week’s theme: “He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (8:32). Jesus spoke “plainly” (parresia, or openly, frankly) about his coming death and resurrection. At this, Peter “took him aside” (proslabomenos, or took hold of him and led him to the side) and began to “rebuke” (epitiman, or reprove, censure, criticize) him.

Why would Jesus’ lead apostle respond so antagonistically? Several factors were likely at work here. First, the disciples apparently viewed the Messiah as a coming military conqueror, one who would overthrow the hated Romans and reestablish the kingdom of Israel. Even after Jesus’ resurrection, his disciples were still waiting for him to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). A suffering servant was not what Peter wanted Jesus to be.

Second, if Jesus was destined for such persecution, it was likely that his disciples would face similar suffering. They were right: Jesus would warn them of “trouble” to come (John 16:33), for they would be hated as their Lord was hated (John 15:18).

Peter’s ultimate motivation, however, was Satanic: “But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. ‘Get behind me, Satan!’ he said. ‘You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’” (Mark 8:33). Jesus “looked at his disciples,” perhaps indicating that Peter was not speaking only for himself. But then he “rebuked” Peter (the same word as in 8:32, where Peter “rebuked” him). He recognized immediately that Peter’s opposition was Satan’s attempt to deter him from the cross. As the enemy’s wilderness temptations were each intended to lure Jesus away from his atoning purpose, so Peter’s rebuke, if heeded, would have turned Jesus from Calvary.

What do we learn from Peter’s opposition to Jesus in this text? When our Lord does not do what we want him to do, are we more likely to obey him unconditionally or to reject...
his apparent will? When following Jesus takes us in a direction different from our intention, do we follow him anyway? How often do we repeat Peter’s sin?

Refuse the lure of self-dependence (14:26-31, 66-72)

Peter would continue to figure prominently in Mark’s Gospel. He was present at the Mount of Transfiguration (9:2-8) and played a significant role in the cursing of the fruitless fig tree (11:20-26). Now we come to the apostle’s most pivotal failure. The episode begins: “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (14:26). Jesus and his disciples had hiked to the Mount of Olives after observing Passover in the Upper Room. Along the way, he warned them of their failure that was coming: “‘You will all fall away,’ Jesus told them, ‘for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the will be scattered’’” (14:27).

Heed the warning of God

They would “fall away” (skandalisthesesthe, fall into sin, give offense) from their Lord, a betrayal predicted in Zechariah 13:7. However, the syntax does not indicate a permanent failure. In fact, Jesus assured them: “But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee” (Mark 14:28). They would desert him, but he would not desert them. They would abandon him, but he would rise from the dead. They would violate their commitment to their Lord, but he would remain committed to them.

In fact, Jesus would meet them again after the resurrection in Galilee. On Easter, Jesus instructed the women to tell his disciples that they were to meet him there (Matt. 28:10). After they received this report, “the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go” (Matt. 28:16). There they were reunited with their risen Lord.

But in Mark 14, Peter was once again certain that Jesus was wrong: “Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not” (Mark 14:29). He “declared” (ephe, or affirmed, stated clearly) that he would not betray his Lord, whatever the others did. His Lord repeated his warning: “‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times’” (14:30).

“I tell you the truth” translates amen, meaning truly, let it be so. Peter would “disown” (aparnese, or deny, disregard, reject) Jesus three times that night. One denial could be a misunderstanding or failure of nerve, but three would indicate a consistent refusal to testify for his Lord. Despite Jesus’ clear warning, “Peter insisted emphatically, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’ And all the others said the same” (14:31). Peter insisted “emphatically” (ekperissos, or excessively, extraordinarily) that he was right and Jesus was wrong, and the other disciples joined him in such confidence.
Self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. Inevitably, our trust in ourselves will lead us to betray our Lord.

*Repent when you fail your Lord*
It would not be long before Jesus’ prediction came to pass. After Jesus’ arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was taken to the court of the high priest, where Peter and John followed him (see John 18:15). Our text resumes: “While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by” (Mark 14:66). While Jesus would face his trials within, standing before the highest authorities in Israel, Peter’s trial would begin with the high priest’s *paidiskon*, meaning *a female slave or servant*.

The group was warming itself by the open fire. Then, “when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. ‘You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,’ she said” (14:67). She “looked closely” (*emblepsasa*, or *looked straight on, examined*) at Peter, and then recognized him as being with “that Nazarene, Jesus.” Her phrase conveyed a sense of contempt for Jesus, an attitude she undoubtedly had learned from the high priest and others in his court.

If Peter confirmed her accusation, she could have alerted the authorities and had him arrested as well. As a result, “he denied it. ‘I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,’ he said, and went out into the entryway” (14:68). Peter “denied” (*ernesato*, or *repudiated, renounced*) her charge. “I don’t know” (*oue oida*, meaning *I don’t recognize or remember*) or “understand” (*epistamai*, or *to be acquainted with*) the accusation, he claimed. He immediately “went out into the entryway” to get away from her.

However, “when the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, ‘This fellow is one of them’” (14:69). Now she was so certain of his identity that she made her accusation to the group standing with them, most of them connected in some way with the high priest. Given a second opportunity to stand up for Jesus, “again he denied it” (14:70a).

Peter would soon have a third opportunity: “After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, ‘Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean’” (14:70b). They knew him to be from Galilee, because “your accent gives you away” (Matt. 26:73). This time Peter was even more emphatic: “He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know this man you’re talking about’” (Mark 14:71).

To “call down curses on himself” does not mean that he resorted to obscenities (*cursing* in our culture), but that he denied the charge with a statement such as, *May the Lord curse me if I’m lying*. Then he “swore” (*omnynai*, or *to make an oath*) to them, likely invoking the Lord. While Jesus had taught him to let his *yes* be *yes* (Matt. 5:34), he was...
so desperate that he sought any means to convince them that he did not even know Jesus. “Began to call down curses” uses syntax that describes repeated action, indicating that Peter continually denied knowing Christ.

In that moment, “immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: ‘Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.’ And he broke down and wept” (Mark 14:72). Mark’s grammar seems to indicate that the rooster’s crow came in the midst of Peter’s denials, cutting them off. In that moment, “the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter” (Luke 22:61). And Peter “broke down” (epibalon, or threw himself over) and “wept” (eklaien, or bewailed).

Such remorse indicates genuine repentance. His grief could have implicated him in Jesus’ trials by identifying him with the accused. At the very least, it would have aroused suspicion on the part of the authorities. But when Peter realized what he had done, he was grieved in heart and repentant in spirit. And such contrition enabled the Lord to extend the forgiveness that would transform this broken disciple.

Earlier we watched Peter disagree with Jesus when the Lord articulated a mission the apostle did not accept. Now we have seen his disagreement when Jesus called him to renounce self-reliance for dependence on God.

Note that Mark was likely not present when this event transpired. John was there, but his Gospel was not written for many years after Mark’s record. In all probability, we have this story because Peter gave it to Mark and insisted that it be included. It was preserved for our sake, to remind us that self-dependence is folly, then and today.

**Trust God’s redeeming grace (16:5-7)**

By God’s grace, Peter’s denial was not the last chapter of his story. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to his tomb (Mark 16:1-4). Here, “as they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed” (16:5). “Alarmed” translates exethambethesan, meaning to be astounded. The word conveys a sense of awe and amazement.

The angel responded, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him”’” (16:6). Given the scholarly consensus that Mark 16:9-20 was not part of the original text of the Gospel of Mark, it seems that this is Mark’s only reference to the resurrection. As a result, he wanted the reader to know that this was “Jesus the Nazarene, who was
crucified,” lest there be any confusion regarding his identity. Jesus was risen, as proven by his empty tomb.

The angel had a commission for these first Easter witnesses: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (16:7). Jesus had earlier told them he would meet them in Galilee (Mark 14:28). Now his messenger, the angel, reinforced his assurance and invitation.

Note that the women were to tell “his disciples and Peter,” especially including the failed apostle in the invitation to meet the risen Lord. Jesus would reach out to Peter personally (John 21:1-23), commissioning him to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17). As the apostle had denied Christ three times, so Jesus gave Peter opportunity to reaffirm his love three times.

The Galilean fisherman would not fail Jesus before the authorities again. He would preach at Pentecost (Acts 2), testify before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4), and face imprisonment for his Lord (Acts 12:1-17). While he was apparently afraid of the “circumcision party” in the early church (Galatians 2:11-21), he was also willing to share Christ with Gentiles and defend their inclusion in the family of God (Acts 10—11).

Peter would one day pay for his commitment with his life. The date was June 29, AD 65. Peter was made to watch his wife’s execution first:

> When the blessed Peter saw his own wife led out to die, he rejoiced because of her summons and her return home, and called to her very encouragingly and comfortingly, addressing her by name, and saying, “O thou, remember the Lord.” Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their perfect disposition toward those dearest to them (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.30.2).

His own execution followed: “He was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.2). An early source describes his death this way:

> Peter, having come to the cross, said: Since my Lord Jesus Christ, who came down from the heaven upon the earth, was raised upon the cross upright, and He has deigned to call to heaven me, who am of the earth, my cross ought to be fixed downmost, so as to direct my feet towards heaven; for I am not worthy to be crucified like my Lord. Then, having reversed the cross, they nailed his feet up (*Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, Ante-Nicene Fathers 8.484).
Conclusion
When we reject God’s plan for our lives or trust our strength rather than the Spirit, we will inevitably fail our Lord. The good news is that his “grace is greater than all our sin.”¹ If Jesus could forgive and use Peter, despite his prideful failures, Jesus can use us all.

Philosopher George Santayana warned us, “The one who does not remember history is bound to live through it again.” When last did you deny your Lord? What will you do to witness boldly for your King this week?

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