

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 12 & 13, 2013
John Crosby
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: The Good News
Mark 1:14-17

You can't learn unless you listen, and you can't listen unless it's quiet. Even when it is quiet, even when you are sitting in the right place, sometimes it is still hard to learn. Some of that is on you. You need to be ready to learn. Some of it, frankly, is on the teacher. Some teachers know too much and cannot communicate, and others don't know what they are talking about. We want this year to begin by asking, what is Jesus trying to teach you?

We are going to start by talking about what makes a great teacher. I've come to believe that Jesus is not great because He is charismatic, and I don't think great teachers necessarily are the ones who remember everybody's name or tell the cutest stories. I think the acid test of a good teacher is what the students do with what is being taught. Medical students with good instructors become great doctors. Apprentices with exceptional teachers become master artists. Chemistry students with wonderful professors go crazy because, who could do that? Really! Math students depend on good instruction. Not only do they learn what is being said, but does it make a difference? Can they put it into their lives? That is the acid test of a teacher. Do their students put it into their lives?

I tell enough stories about my mess-ups to be able to tell this one. I graduated from a small college that had chapels, once a week. Several years later I was asked to come back and speak at chapel. I spoke about what God had been teaching me. Primarily what God had been teaching me was that I could not hear His voice well unless I learned from the least and the lost and the left behind that nobody else was listening to. I challenged the students to hear the voice of Jesus by going to places where the least and the lost and the left behind needed comfort and someone to care about them. I said they would learn far more than they were able to teach and that it would touch them and touch the people that they were sent out to recognize. At the end of the talk, I said, "Look, if you want to see the least and the lost and the left behind and learn from them even as you serve them, come on up afterwards and we will talk about where that might happen." It was just one of those times where, literally, lots and lots of students came up. It was sort of exciting. In the back of the chapel I noticed one of my old professors sitting there. You know, the kind who when you are talking would start to shake his head like this and so you would go, "Well, you know, there is another side to this and uh...." He sits there, and finally all the kids are gone and he comes up to me. He says, "John, sometimes a student surpasses his master. Those are our best days." And he just walked away.

That was when I realized, that is what a good teacher is about. When the teacher gives something that changes the lives not just of the students but of people around the students. We say too easily that Jesus is a great teacher. That only happens to be true if the students of Jesus, the teacher, actually do what He says. So especially in this service, especially for those of us who have heard these teachings year after year, decade after decade, are we *doing* them?

I'm going to suggest to you that these 10 weeks will be more helpful if you read two books. One is a book by John Ortberg called *Who Is This Man?* It's about Jesus, a fabulous, fabulous book. He talks about a master teacher and says it a little differently.

Jesus taught to change lives. In the educational system of our day, we tend to think of teaching as the transfer of information. The teacher pours information into the student like pouring water into an empty jug, and the student is evaluated by one thing only: can he parrot back what the teacher said? The number one question in any class is (if you're a teacher, you know this), "Will this be on the final?" We all take notes so we can remember until the final exam. No one took notes when Jesus taught. Why? Because it is natural to automatically remember what changes our lives. If you were around on 9/11 or when President John Kennedy was assassinated or when Pearl Harbor got attacked, you remember.

People who listened to him at the time said things like, "We've never heard anyone talking like this" and they didn't just mean his tone of voice or his skillful public speaking.... Something about Jesus keeps prodding people to do what they would rather not: Francis of Assisi gives up his possessions, Augustine gives up his mistress, John Newton gives up his slave trade, and Father Damien gives up his health. He inspires Leo Tolstoy, who in turn inspires Mohandas Gandhi, who in turn inspires Martin Luther King Jr. He teaches Desmond Tutu to dream and his Truth and Reconciliation Commission saves South Africa. Jesus taught to change lives...yours and mine.

Could Jesus' teaching change yours? This is where it all starts. The passage we are going to look at today is the first time Jesus teaches. I'd love it if you would pull out your Bibles and turn to Mark, chapter 1. The Gospel of Mark is probably the first record we have of Jesus. First comes Mark, then Matthew and Luke take what Mark wrote and add their own spin to it. John is in another part of the Roman Empire altogether, so Mark is the first record. This is the first chapter of Mark. These are the first words that Jesus teaches. Starting with verse 14, it says,

¹⁴ After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

The teacher has started class. If it is not underlined in your Bibles, would you underline two words there, Jesus went. Right at the start of verse 14, it says, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went...." This is a reminder to me, and I hope to you that God has called the class. God has taken the initiative. G. K. Chesterton was an Englishman who said, "Since the day He [Jesus] came, it has never been quite enough to say that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world; the rumor is that God had left His heavens to set the world right." Not God is in heaven and all is right with the world. God has left His heavens to set the world right.

Jesus went. And then as you read that line, it says Jesus went "proclaiming the good news of God." We don't talk a lot about the translated Bible, but the Greek word for the good news is *euangelion*, *ev* or *eu* meaning good and *angelion* meaning message, good news or Gospel. This is where we get the word evangelism or evangelize or evangelical or evangel. An evangelical is

one who shares the evangel, the Gospel. It's a term that is now freighted with so much that it is no longer good news, is it? It's not even news. It is not so much any more about God as it is about a political position or a sect and yet the evangel is still supposed to be proclaimed as good news, not from us but from God.

I saw a commercial the other day that grabbed me. I don't know if any of you have seen it. It was in prime time. It was very short and was about hope. One person after another would talk about hope and how they had received hope. Then Pastor Joel Osteen came on and said, "You know, I think you are just one day away, baby, just one day away from something that will change your lives. This is good news!" I saw the commercial and thought, wow! That's effective! That *is* good news. The challenge for me is not that Pastor Osteen is wrong. It is that it is only one side of good news. It's like describing the Congressional Medal of Honor award and never mentioning the battle. Hope without truth is fool's gold. The good news cannot just be about good things that will happen. It cannot just be about the American dream or success. The good news that God brings you is different. This is Mark's story of Jesus' first sermon.

In Luke's story, Luke, chapter 4, he talked about the good news and quoted the prophet Isaiah. He said,

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That is to say, good news comes when all the debts are canceled. That is good news from Jesus. Laura and I got a little good news this week. Like many of you, we have been involved with the International Justice Mission. Gary Haugen [President and CEO of International Justice Mission] has preached here. The good news can never come unless there is bad news. (*Slide shown.*) This little girl has bad news. She is in India. She is one of more than 23 million Indians who are virtually enslaved. (*Slide shown.*) They have had to sell themselves or sell their children because they have run out of money and now are in forced labor places like this brick factory or in cigarette-making places, and they are not allowed to leave. They work, literally, sometimes from the age of three or four or five years of age with no end in sight. That is not good news. That is bad news. A government worker comes by this place and asks a group of them, "How many of you would like to leave if you could?" But they could not until the International Justice Mission came back to the brick factory in the dark before dawn and knocked on the doors and said, "Would you please bring out everyone here so that we can check their papers." They found many of them illegally held in basic slavery, and for the cost of about 2,000 rupees, \$20, bought the freedom for these people, over 150 of them. They now have papers to prove that they cannot be enslaved again. Jesus said,

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind....

This is the good news. Then Jesus goes on and He says, "I've come to tell you the good news. The time has come, the time is now."

Anybody see *Lincoln* yet? It's a powerful film. I would encourage you to view it. It takes place towards the end of Lincoln's career. The war is grinding to a close. Lincoln has signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and yet his concern is that once his war powers by which he signs the Emancipation Proclamation, come to an end in the end of the war, when the Congress comes back, they may not ratify it. If all the southern states come right back in, it may be overturned. He becomes increasingly convinced that he has to have Congress vote to overturn slavery forever, to enshrine it in the Constitution. At one famous point in the film, he is turning to his recalcitrant cabinet who are fearful that he is going to break the momentum of the north. He says, "No, no. It must happen and it must happen now. Now. Now! Now is the time. Before the war ends. Now!" Jesus says, "The time is now" because timing *is* everything. Don't wait until too late. But the time doesn't just come once for you. The time comes every day for you, for me, to decide what voice we will listen to, which way we will go, whom will we follow. What time is it for you? What time is it?

Jesus knows what life is all about, real life. He said, "Life somehow is all about loving God and loving others." Rick Warren says it this way, "Life minus love equals zero.... The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time. The best time to love is now." Who needs your love right now? "I bring the good news of God. The time has come." And then Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is near." I think there are two pillars of the teaching of Jesus. Scot McKnight is going to talk about one next week, but this is the other pillar. Jesus comes and teaches about the Kingdom of God as if Jesus is the King. "The Kingdom of God has come near."

The other book I wanted to talk about is *The Jesus Creed* by Scot McKnight. McKnight says this.

As navigators need the North Star for direction, as hikers need a compass, and as vacationers need a map, so the followers of Jesus need a clear vision to live.... The term Jesus gives is kingdom, the society in which Jesus changes life. Those committed to the kingdom form a society, which we now call the church. Jesus believes the kingdom of God is present. This can mean only one thing; He expects His followers to live in the kingdom in their daily lives—right now.... The kingdom transformation of life has begun.

A new kind of life can happen right now. You don't have to wait to die to live. You can start it now. There's a part of me and I know there is a part of you that wants to live differently. How do I get into that Kingdom? Jesus went, proclaiming the good news, saying the time is come because the Kingdom is near. How do you get in? You repent and believe the good news, that same *euangelion* again, the *evangel*. Believe the good news. Repent and believe the good news. Now repentance, we've said here, is not saying, "I'm sorry," which often really means, "I'm sorry I was caught." Repentance is not "I'm sorry. I'll try harder next time." Repentance is more like "I'm broken. Help me." Jesus comes and says, "I've come to help."

One of the highlights of my last year was that Princeton Seminary elected a new president named Craig Barnes. Craig is a good friend of mine. He *gets* the idea that he is broken. He says,

The confession that we are unable to get the life of our dreams is the first step.... What distinguishes humanity in creation is a craving to have meaning that's eternal that sustains us through the shifting tides of our years.... The source of our hunger for life's meaning refuses to be satisfied with any meaning other than the eternal."

We are all looking for the great *some day* but *some day* does not come on this earth because we are broken. Jesus says, "Repent does not mean 'I'm sorry. I'll try harder.' It means 'I'm broken. Help me, will you?'" I grew up in a family that was broken, just as yours is. Mine, as many, was broken by addiction. Because of those addictions, I became intensely aware of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement and Al-Anon. They understand repentance and brokenness. As a matter of fact, the whole movement centers around the very First Step, "We admitted we were powerless" over the power of alcohol or sex or drugs or gambling or money, or whatever "that our lives had become unmanageable." "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." That's what repenting is. "Help me. I'm broken. I can't fix it." That's repentance. Jesus says, "If you want to get into the Kingdom, believe that. Repent and believe the good news." Believing is not adding four more lines to your notes. Believing is turning toward that truth, admitting that we are broken and that God can help.

We are in this room because that guy named Martin Luther rediscovered what the Bible teaches, that the Bible is not, "Try harder and then I'll love you." The Bible is, "I love you so much. Turn to me, will you? Quit trying so hard. Turn to Me." Luther has his life turned upside down by this, and he starts to gather people who want to live that way again, the way the first followers of Jesus did. One of them was a professor named Philipp Melanchthon. Melanchthon, bright guy, has this ongoing personal failure that he was afraid to tell anybody about, that he could not stop doing. Finally he sucks up his courage and admits to Luther that he looks good on the outside but has this thing on the inside. He says, "I try, I try, I try, and I can't stop doing it." Luther says, "Well, let's pray together that God will stop it." They pray and Melanchthon feels free, but he comes back the next month and he says, "I did it again. Would you pray with me again?" "Of course." Luther prays with him. The third month he comes back and says, "I'm sorry. I can't seem to stop. Pray, please, harder." And they pray together. The fourth month he comes back and Luther sees him at the door and says, "Really?" and Melanchthon says, "I don't know. I try so hard." Luther turns to him and says, "Philipp, the Gospel is about Jesus. It's not about you. You don't fight sin by wrestling with the devil but by turning to the Savior."

That is what we are called to believe. *That's* good news. Turn to the Savior. Jesus will say later, "Come to Me all of you who are weary of trying harder, of pretending so much. Come to Me and I will give you rest." Believe the good news. Believe actually means just doing some tiny small thing that says, "I'm broken. Please help me" and then turning toward that help.

Laura and I have had the great privilege of going to South Africa on your behalf. We went once to this large cathedral in Soweto, one of the slums of Johannesburg. This was Desmond Tutu's church. Huge, open and quiet. One of our travelers was from the choir, Ruth Parton; she went out front and started singing *Amazing Grace*, and it just rings throughout the whole place. It was a powerful moment for me. Then I heard the story of the day Nelson Mandela was released. Finally their leader was out. Revolution was at hand. Mandela goes to Tutu, and that evening Tutu takes him to this church. They have a praise service that explodes. The church overfills. Thousands of people walk the streets to the church. The South African government was afraid that riots would start among the blacks. Because they are so afraid, they surrounded the church with troops, primarily white at that point to quell riots. The singing gets louder and louder and the

service hasn't even started yet. Then Tutu comes out of the cathedral without Nelson Mandela and turns to the troops, mostly young, white men, and says, "Oh, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. Gentlemen, put down your guns and come inside. You're on the wrong side. Come to the winning side." Tutu is about this tall. He is so excited, he is literally dancing back and forth. *(Slide shown.)* You can see in the picture. He's got on this big, red robe. He says, "Come in. Come to the winning side." Four or five of the soldiers put down their rifles and went inside but most stayed outside in fear.

"Turn," Jesus says. "Believe the good news." "He saw two fishermen and He said, 'Come and follow Me, and I will change your life forever.'" This little passage ends with the words, "And immediately..." This is one of Mark's favorite phrases in the Gospel of Mark, "And immediately," *kai euthus*. "And immediately, they dropped everything and followed Him." And their lives were never the same. This is the teaching of Jesus.

We are going to spend weeks talking about the teachings of Jesus because Jesus is a master teacher, not because it sounds so smart, not because you can pass the test. William Barclay says it this way. "Jesus did not say to them, 'I have a theological system I'd like you to consider. I have some theories I'd like you to ponder. I have an ethical system that I would like you follow.' No, the teaching of Jesus begins by Him saying, 'Come in. Walk with Me.'"

Lord Jesus, You are still asking people to come because the time is right, the time is now. Not just at the start of the new year but in a chapter in our lives, whether we are in high school or in retirement. This day, this hour, the time is now, and You come to us. You say, "Admit that you are broken and you need help. Admit that you want some good news, stronger than a stock tip. Come and find out how much I love you and follow Me to life." In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost as well, Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.