

WEEK FOUR

MARK 9:2-10:16

DAY ONE

*Through Jesus, we don't need perfect righteousness,
just repentant helplessness, to access the presence of God.*

— Timothy Keller

One of the most fascinating and complex aspects of being human is our capacity for ambivalence — the ability to experience two contradictory emotions at the same time. For example, we can see a photo of a friend's new baby and feel genuinely happy for the gift of new life while also sensing disappointment or sadness — perhaps because of an unmet desire to be a parent or grief that the “baby stage” of life has long passed.

In Mark 9, we will meet a man who comes to Jesus in hopes that he will provide healing for his son — a young boy who has spent the majority of his life enduring terrible suffering. Toward the end of his conversation with Jesus, the man has a major ambivalent moment as he blurts out these famous words, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). He shows up asking Jesus for help, although he is unsure as to whether there is really any hope for his son.

We learn so much about the character of Jesus through this encounter. First, Jesus' response to this man shows us that God is capable of handling our questions, disappointments, frustrations, and fears. It can be so tempting to pull away from God in seasons of doubt, worried that we're being a “bad Christian” by expressing these feelings to God. In reality, it actually takes faith to question God — because we must start with a basic trust in the truth that he exists and that he is involved in our lives.

Even more than that, we see that perfect faith is not a requirement for God to show up in our lives. Many Christians hear the false and wounding message along the way that we wouldn't continue to suffer if we just had more faith. We can forget that God does his best work in the lives of those who don't have it all together — who know and admit that they need him. God's desire for us is not that we would spend our energy attempting to earn his approval like a letter grade, but rather that we would live our lives in humble surrender today more than we did yesterday.

READ

Mark 9:2-41

Mark 9:2-41

The Transfiguration

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what “rising from the dead” meant.

¹¹ And they asked him, “Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?”

¹² Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? ¹³ But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.”

Jesus Heals a Boy Possessed by an Impure Spirit

¹⁴ When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵ As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

¹⁶ “What are you arguing with them about?” he asked.

¹⁷ A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸ Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”

¹⁹ “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

²⁰ So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

²¹ Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. ²² “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

²³ “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

²⁶ The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

²⁸ After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”

²⁹ He replied, “This kind can come out only by prayer.”

Jesus Predicts His Death a Second Time

³⁰ They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, ³¹ because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.” ³² But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.

³³ They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” ³⁴ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.”

³⁶ He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

RESPOND

For the next 7 days, plan to stop at least three times during the day to pray — in the morning, afternoon, and the evening. Set an alarm to remind yourself if that would be helpful. When we do this, it helps to make us aware of God's presence with us and that life is about more than just the work and tasks we engage in each day.

PRAY

Looking back at your responses to the reflection questions, spend some time today in a really honest conversation with God. Maybe you need to write out a totally unfiltered letter to God about your disappointments, questions, or doubts. Maybe you need to ask God if he would give you a new awareness of your need for him.

DAY TWO

Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort.
— Dallas Willard

As Christians, we believe that every person is a mixture of good and bad. While we have all been created in the image of God and possess immense value and worth, we also have all done, thought, and said things that damage and destroy that same significance in ourselves and others.

While we know that sin is destructive, we all have those places where we want to get as close to the line of sin as we can without crossing it. Even more than that, we are prone to justify, rationalize, and smooth over the edges of our sin. We can hide pieces of our broken selves into the shadowy corners of our lives, not admitting to others or even ourselves that we have gotten in over our heads. We know that God views sin so seriously that the sacrifice of Christ was required for us to be rescued from it — and yet we still live dangerously close to it.

Jesus has some powerfully graphic words about how we should respond to sin in our lives. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off ... And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out” (Mark 9:43,47). And while Jesus isn't encouraging us to literally dismember ourselves to avoid sin, it is a wake-up call for us to consider our attitude toward sin in our lives. In the same way we wouldn't want a surgeon to leave cancerous tumors in our bodies, sin is a disease that threatens our lives, our relationships, and impacts the way that those outside the church view the Christian faith.

And while we are free from needing to earn God's acceptance through our obedience to him, it does require discipline and effort to break down sinful patterns of thought and behavior and replace them with ones that are honoring to God and that cause non-Christians to be curious about how our lives have changed.

READ

Mark 9:42-10:16

Mark 9:42-10:16

Causing to Stumble

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.”

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Divorce

10 Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them.

² Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

³ “What did Moses command you?” he replied.

⁴ They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”

⁵ “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. ⁶ “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, ⁸ and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

¹⁰ When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. ¹¹ He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. ¹² And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

The Little Children and Jesus

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

REFLECT

Sin falls into two major categories: sins of *commission*, when we do things we shouldn’t, and sins of *omission*, when we don’t do things we should do.

1 What’s one thing that I’ve done recently that I regret?

2 What is something I’m not doing that I know I should?

3 What are practical things I do in my life to avoid sin?

RESPOND

Below is a list of spiritual practices which correspond to each category of sin. Knowing yourself and the patterns of sin that you personally struggle with, circle at least one practice from each column to try this week (List adapted from *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun).

PRACTICES OF ENGAGEMENT <i>To address sins of <u>omission</u></i>	PRACTICES OF ABSTINENCE <i>To address sins of <u>commission</u></i>
WORSHIP To honor God as the best thing in life	FASTING To let go of an appetite in order to seek God
STUDY OF SCRIPTURE To know what the Bible says and how it interacts with my life	SOLITUDE To leave people behind and enter into time alone with God
SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION To carry the life-shaping words of God in me at all times and in all places	SILENCE To free myself from the addiction to and distraction of noise so that I can be open to God
SERVICE To reflect the helping, caring, and sharing love of God in the world	SABBATH To set apart time (typically one day per week) for rest and worship of God
CELEBRATION Engaging in intentional joy and gratitude	CONFESSION/SELF-EXAMINATION To surrender my weaknesses and faults to the forgiving love of Christ
PRAYER Communicating with and listening to God	SECRECY To follow the simple and often hidden way of Christ
COMMUNITY To intentionally invest in relationships with other Christians	UNPLUGGING To be fully present to and uninterrupted in my interactions with God and others

PRAY

Spend some time in prayer today confessing and asking God to help you receive his forgiveness. Ask him to give you the strength to put some practical steps in place that will help you walk away from the patterns of sin that are damaging to yourself and others.

DAY THREE

*If I find in myself desires which nothing in the world can satisfy,
the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.*
— C.S. Lewis

In today's culture, we don't discuss the concept of idolatry much. Maybe we heard the word if we attended Sunday school as a kid. Most of us today aren't bowing down and praying to statues.

And yet, idolatry is alive and well in the hearts of all of us. The biblical definition of an idol is "anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living" (Timothy Keller). When we think of it this way, anything can be an idol, even the good things in our lives. Money. Power. Success. Relationships. Appearance. Romantic love. Our children.

In today's reading, we will meet a young man who is caught in the grips of idolatry. This man's relationship with wealth was broken — he relied on it to provide him with status, significance and a sense of security. In the end, the very thing he thought was providing him with control over his world was ultimately controlling him. Possessions became so central in his life that he was terrified at the thought of living his life without them — so much so that he missed the opportunity to enter the adventure of following Jesus.

Jesus, knowing full well the internal battle this young man was experiencing, communicates with such gentle affection. His response to us today is the same. Jesus invites each of us to let go of those things we grip so tightly, because they will never fill the deepest longings of our hearts anyway — only he can do that. Just like the young man in this story, we must choose. Will we remain tied to the things in our lives that can't deliver on their promises or enter into the life we were created for?

READ

Mark 10:17-52

Mark 10:17-52

The Rich and the Kingdom of God

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good — except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

²⁰ "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²² At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

²⁸ Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

²⁹ "Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — along with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Jesus Predicts His Death a Third Time

³² 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. ³³ "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, ³⁴ who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."

The Request of James and John

³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

³⁹ “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Blind Bartimaeus Receives His Sight

⁴⁶ Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” ⁵⁰ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

⁵¹ “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

⁵² “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

REFLECT

The following questions are helpful in determining what might be idols in your life.

1 Fill in the blank:

Losing _____ would make life feel hardly worth living.

2 When do I feel most anxious, angry, or discouraged?

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3 What in my life provides me with a sense of confidence, security, and safety?

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RESPOND

What can you do to loosen the grip of an idol in your life? Be sure to tell someone or your small group to hold you accountable to follow through with your decision.

POTENTIAL SUGGESTIONS:

Money — Try giving some away, maybe even more than you feel comfortable with.

Appearance — Intentionally take time off from working out, or make a commitment to not purchase any new clothes for a month, 3 months, 6 months, or beyond.

Success — Give away an opportunity to someone else to achieve or take the lead.

Relationships — Take a step back from dating for a period of time, reduce the amount of activities/clubs/teams your kids are signed up for.

PRAY

Spend some time today acknowledging your idols to God. Talk to God about your fears and how your commitment to these other things provide you with a sense of meaning and value. Ask God to give you the courage to trust him to meet your needs for love, value, meaning, and purpose.

A DEEPER LOOK DIVORCE

“Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ ‘What did Moses command you?’ he replied. They said, ‘Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.’ ‘It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,’ Jesus replied.”
— Mark 10:2-5

In all times and cultures, the topic of divorce has been a sensitive one. In the Old Testament, a law was established which required men to write a “certificate of divorce” for their wives, that provided her with the legal right to remarry (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). In ancient Israel, women were not afforded the same legal rights and financial freedoms as men. Without the ability to own property or earn income, a divorce could leave a woman utterly destitute, with no way to provide for herself and her children.

Much like today, the religious thinkers of the time held differing views about what constituted grounds for divorce. There was the more conservative approach promoted by a prominent rabbi named Shammai that viewed infidelity as the only legitimate grounds for divorce. Another leading rabbi named Hillel had a much looser approach, claiming that divorce could occur “for any good cause,” which included things like not liking your wife’s cooking! As a result, many men (women were not permitted to initiate divorce at this time) were taking liberties to divorce their wives for an assortment of unsubstantial reasons.

When the Pharisees approach Jesus to ask his opinion about divorce, the Old Testament law as well as well-known religious teachings would have formed their frame of reference. And like many other conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees, we see that their intent is to test Jesus. This time, their hope is to publicly humiliate him by putting him on the spot with a question about a divisive, hot-button issue.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees and the surrounding crowd is both wise and challenging. He says, “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law” (Mark 10:5). Essentially, what Jesus was saying here is that this law was not God’s stamp of approval on divorce, but rather a means of protection for women, who constituted some of the most vulnerable of the population.

Jesus goes on to describe the foundation of marriage from the point of creation. It’s important to note that, whenever creation is referenced in the Bible, it is very important. Jesus wanted to make clear that a superficial attitude toward marriage and divorce did not reflect God’s design for the marriage relationship.

