

## **CHRIST'S FIRST MESSAGE**

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### **Scripture Reading** **MARK 1:14-34**

Mark 1:9-13 records the events of Christ's baptism and temptation. Then we read in Mark 1:14 that, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Thus, with a very few words, we have revealed to us the message of Jesus Christ. And today we are going to take a few minutes to think about the meaning of the message.

First of all, please notice the occasion of the message. From the Gospel of Mark, it appears that Jesus went to Galilee to preach this message right after his baptism and temptation. But actually a whole year had passed between Mark 1:13 and Mark 1:14. Only the Gospel of John tells us some of the things that happened during that year.

The more I think about that year, the more I see it as the final year of an era. During that year, the main message being preached in the land was the need to repent. The message was meant to prepare people for the Messiah. During that year Jesus also preached the same message. And both Jesus and John the Baptist were baptizing people who decided to repent. Their ministries overlapped for one year.

According to John 3:22, during that year, Jesus was baptizing people in the Judean countryside, probably very near the place where He Himself had been baptized. At that time John had moved up the Jordan River to the north near the land of Galilee, a place under the control of a man named Herod. Both John and Jesus were telling people to repent. But John got into trouble when he told Herod that he should repent, because Herod had committed an act of adultery by taking his brother's wife. Kings and officials do not like to be told that they have committed a crime. Herod was not happy and neither was his wife, so he had John put into prison and later executed.

Therefore, a major transition occurred at the end of the first year of Christ's ministry. John the Baptist was forced into an early retirement and Jesus took up where John left off. However, Jesus prepared to take the message that John was preaching and add on to it. From that point on Jesus would not only emphasize repentance, but He would also emphasize salvation. The main message being preached would now be a two-part message.

Jesus became rather bold at the beginning of His second year of ministry. Mark 1:14 says that He decided to go to Galilee. That was Herod's territory. Herod had just put John into prison because he didn't like what John was saying. Now Jesus was going to move into Herod's territory and say the same thing, so what He did was very bold. Jesus also became more aggressive and deliberate in His ministry. He began to call some of those who had been following Him on a part-time basis. He now challenged them to become more involved in following Him. His training program intensified. And Jesus also became more aggressive in performing miracles. Verses 21 through 34 of our scripture reading emphasize Christ's ministry of healing and casting out demons. All this activity added to the credibility of the message He was preaching. In Mark 1:27 we see that the people were willing to listen to the new message Jesus was teaching, because Jesus "taught with authority."

So let's examine the simplicity and profoundness of Christ's message. There is something very unique and, I think, quite miraculous about this message. The more a person preaches it and lives it, the more exciting and new it becomes. Those who view it as boring and old are the ones who have failed to live it and share it.

Look at the simplicity of the Christ's first message. "Repent," He said, "for the kingdom of heaven is near." That's how the words are recorded in Mathew 4:17. Mark 1:15 records Jesus as saying, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Though the order of the words is a bit different, the message is the same. The first thing that people are called to do is to repent. The reason why people need to repent is because God's heavenly kingdom is near. And the second thing that people are called to do is to believe. The reason for believing is the same as the reason for repenting; namely, because the kingdom of God is near. This was Christ's first message, and it is still the message that we must preach today.

Again, it begins with a call to repent. Christ always began at this point. A sick person needs to know that he is sick

and admit that he is sick and desire to get better; otherwise, he will never seek healing.

While serving as pastor of churches in Taiwan I stood by the bedside of a dying man who, up to his dying day, never knew that he had a terminal illness. At the families request the doctor never told him. The family members knew, but they believed it would only increase the suffering of the man for him to know that he was going to die soon. Thus, they decided not to tell him. They brushed off the illness as something light and convinced the man that he would soon be back on his feet. Later, I discovered this to be a common practice in Taiwan.

Here in America we are more up front with patients. But, here in America, we also tend to be fatalistic. Too easily we come to the conclusion that there is no hope. Some doctors will even convince their patients that the only way to eliminate the pain they are suffering is to commit suicide.

Now, the tradition of not letting the patient know about his terminal illness and the practice of using suicide as a means of avoiding suffering have one thing in common. They are both based on the belief that there is no possibility of healing. If the family members of the man who had the terminal illness in Taiwan really believed he could be healed from his cancer, they would have been up front with him and encouraged him to undergo whatever treatment was necessary to recover. And if the people in the U.S. who chose suicide over suffering had truly believed they could be cured, then they would have endured the suffering in order to experience the healing. As long as there is a possibility of healing, there is no need to deny the sickness and there is no need to loose hope.

Jesus said, "Repent." Let's admit that we are sick, because the One who can heal us is near. The kingdom of God is near. There is hope. Jesus is the only one who can ultimately heal us from all of our sicknesses: physical, emotional, and spiritual.

When Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is near," He was talking about Himself. Christ is the only perfect expression of God's kingdom that has ever existed. Our ability to represent the kingdom of God upon this earth depends on how well others are able to see Christ in us. When the kingdom of God is near, there is always hope of healing. Repent. Admit that you are sick, because the One who has the power to heal is here.

Physically, emotionally, and spiritually, we are all sick people. When we try to hide the fact, we only delay the healing that needs to happen. Last week, Yilo stood before us and admitted for the first time in public that he suffered for years from clinical depression. That was a brave thing for him to do.

But all of us are not well, even though many of us are reluctant to admit the fact. And the biggest problem we have is not physical or emotional. It is spiritual. We often pray for those with cancer. But, as far as total health is concerned, some people who have cancer are actually healthier than some of us who don't have cancer. If we were only willing to admit it, then we might decide to do something about it.

There was once a married couple who only had one child. He was a son, and they loved him very much. They were poor people who lived in the country, but they determined that they would do everything in their power to give their son the best. And, in their minds, the best was to send him to a prestigious college. So they worked hard and sacrificed much to earn the needed money. When their neighbors bought cars, they continued to walk to wherever they had to go. They worked so hard that they even sacrificed their time with God. They neglect to worship God and have fellowship with other believers. Those parents, like so many today, were sick, but their pride and determination to reach their goal to give their child the best prevented them from realizing how desperately ill they were.

No person will decide to do something about his sickness until he first admits that he has a sickness and desires to be cured from the sickness. Once the awareness and the desire are present, then practical steps can be taken to experience the needed healing. First repent, and then believe. "Believing" is the emphasis of the second part of Christ's message.

Realizing that the One who can heal us is near, we now come to Him for healing. That is the meaning of believing. It involves praying, but it is more than just making words come out of our mouths. It is admitting to the fact that we cannot solve the problems ourselves, and crying out to God for help. And our first concern must be for our spiritual health. We need forgiveness from things we have done wrong in the past. We need power to overcome temptation in the present. And we need a hope of going to heaven in the future. We must admit to these needs and then cry out to God for healing. Emotional health and physical health are less important than spiritual health; however, even these

needs we must bring to God. We must cry out to God for healing in all areas, believing that He will ultimately heal us and make us completely whole, because that is His desire.

Believe, because the kingdom of God is near. Come to Jesus for healing, because the One who never fails to cure those who come to Him is right here. But you say, "My mother or my father or my child asked Jesus to cure him of a terrible sickness and now he is dead." Yes, my child may now be separated from me, but my child is not lost, and in heaven he will have a body that will never get sick and will never grow old.

Here, upon this earth, we will find no other who can heal like Jesus. Happy is the person who realizes before it is too late that they must come to Jesus for healing.

Like so many parents today, the couple I mentioned a while ago were willing even to sacrifice their relationship with God to give their child the best education. Finally the day came when their dream was realized and their son went off to a fine college. But they missed him very much. One day the father had an idea. "Let's go to the city and visit our son," he said. And they did.

As they arrived, their son was walking along with his friend. "Look at the strange looking pair coming up the walk," said his friend with a laugh. The son looked up. "Where? Oh, I see them now. They're just a couple of strange country folks who have come to the city." He laughed too.

And, as they started to make fun of the clothes that the couple wore, suddenly, to his horror, the son recognized them as his own parents. All of a sudden he was overwhelmed with embarrassment. He quickly told his friend that he left something in his room. And just as the parents saw him and called to him, he ran around the corner and disappeared.

"I know that was my son," sobbed the mother. "Yes," said the father. "We're just a couple of old country folks, and he was ashamed of us." And it was at that moment the father realized his mistake. The thought struck him like a bolt of lightning. He was humbled and quickly felt the need to repent and reach out to God for healing. "You know," he said to his wife, "Ever since we got so busy with our son's education, we've neglected our Heavenly Father. We've always been too busy to go to church or have family devotions. We've treated our Heavenly Father even worse than our son has treated us." So, from that day on, things began to change for that couple. They confessed their sin to God and asked Him for healing. But their believing was more than just words. They actually began the difficult process of developing the disciplines of prayer and meditation and Bible reading. And they began to seek fellowship. They worked hard at using their spiritual gifts to minister to other people.

Too many of us have waited too long to do what Christ's first message tells us to do. For too many of us the message has become old and boring, because we have stopped living it out and we do not share it with others.

"The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." May God melt the hard shells around our hearts if this message has become old and boring. This message should always seem new and exciting, because our problems and our need for healing never go away on this side of the grave.

"The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." May God give us the determination to share this message with others for the rest of our lives. While learning the Chinese language, I was often reminded that you lose what you don't use. Many of you will lose the little Chinese you know, because you never use it. And the same thing is true with the gospel. When we fail to consistently share it with others we lose an appreciation of its power to heal, and eventually we even forget the message.

Let's do what the message tells us to do, and let's share the message with others. And as we obey and share the message, let's seek the help of other people who have the same desire. We have several small groups that have already formed, but, in a church this size, there should be many more. We can best obey and share the message when we have other people to help us. The Christian life was never meant to live alone. Let's respond to Christ's first message, and let's do it now.