



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

SEPTEMBER 2010 | VOL: 3 | NO: 9



WEEK 1 :: SEPTEMBER 5

IT'S RIGHT THERE, CAN'T YOU SEE IT? :: MARK 1:14-16

In the famed novel *Pilgrim's Progress*, the lovable protagonist makes his way from point A to point B. He's on a journey, and while there is plenty of growth in his actual journey, we're left yearning for the end result: when he reaches Heaven, or the Kingdom.

Of course, we're all on this life journey. We're all being grown and stretched as we make our way through the day-to-day, thinking about what lies ahead and what our reward will be.

But what if that means we're falling short of what's already available to us?
"The Kingdom of God is here."

Even 2,000 years ago, back in Jesus' day, he was telling stories and performing miracles to consistently drive home a point: the Kingdom of God is presently available. Sure the earth isn't perfect and there is pain in this world, pain that will be eradicated when we are in heaven; but we can't turn a blind eye to His Kingdom that's on the earth now.

The part of Jesus' Kingdom that's available to us now is abundant life. We always talk about eternal life and how we shall live forever in our heavenly home. But Jesus said that he had come so we could *have* life and have it more abundantly. He was telling us that we can have it now. Any Christian who is not walking in that freedom, who is not looking for their pieces of heaven on earth, is not living out the full life that Jesus intended for his followers.

How do we reach abundant life in a world saturated with pain and evil? What did Jesus say?

"Repent for the Kingdom of God is near."

We often think of repenting as stopping sin, and it is turning away from what is evil. But it is more than that. Repenting is a new way of seeing the world. It's understanding that our original view of the world (think original sin) is a very short-sighted one.

To take on the mind of Christ is to see the world through God's eyes: to recognize the beauty and the goodness that is the present Kingdom and to consider all things in the long-term. Jesus asked his disciples, "Is the Kingdom of God in you?" For the Kingdom of God to be present, we must bear it within us; we must proclaim this new way of thinking. We are the citizens of this Kingdom, the representation is us.

The Kingdom of God is *here* because God has chosen for it to be present through us.

RELATED VERSES

Matthew 3:2

I Corinthians 2:12-16

Colossians 3:2



DISCUSSION STARTER

Where do you see Heaven on earth?

QUESTIONS

Why is it so difficult for us to acknowledge the Kingdom of God is *here*? What evidences of its presence are available to us?

What does it mean to take on the mind of Christ? How is this different from our traditional definitions of repentance? What does it look like in our daily life?

Why is it so important that we recognize the immediate presence of God's Kingdom? What does this do for our faith? For our witness? For our community?

What is the Kingdom of God really? Full life? God's presence? No sin or pain? What do we need to change about our ideas of the Kingdom to accept its presence on earth?

ACTION STEP

Every day for a week, look for something on this earth that is from the Kingdom of God now. Write it down. Meditate on God's presence on the earth today.



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WEEK ONE NOTES

**WEEK 2 :: SEPTEMBER 12**
DROP OUTS :: MARK 1:16-20

There are some interesting things to note about Jesus' calling of Simon and Andrew. Although it seems that Jesus appears out of nowhere, asks them to follow him, and they somehow are mesmerized into doing so, this is not the case. They had met Jesus previously (their first meeting is in John 1:35-42) after having been John the Baptist's disciples. It's recorded that they spent an entire day with Jesus, believing he was the Messiah, and Jesus even told Simon his new name would be Peter. Several months probably passed between this initial meeting and Jesus' calling of the two, in which time they had probably seen some of his miracles and heard his teachings. So the calling for them was not something that they were completely unprepared for. They had likely followed Jesus around for some time.

Jesus calling them was, however, quite unorthodox. Students that wanted to become *talmidim*, translated as disciples, to a famous rabbi, usually went to the rabbi and asked permission, not the other way around as pictured in Jesus calling his disciples. Only a very select few actually became *talmidim* of a rabbi—while every Jewish boy was taught Torah since he was young, only the best of the best were accepted as *talmidim*, and these would eventually go on to become teachers of the law. Disciples of a rabbi would not only learn about scripture, but follow the rabbi around and take on his lifestyle. They would ideally try to imitate the rabbi in every way they could.

Here, however, Jesus bids Andrew and Simon to come follow him in a reversal of this: instead of going to a rabbi and convincing him of their worth as students, Jesus goes to his chosen and essentially says, "You are already worthy, come follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

It is also significant that they are in the middle of their work day. Some scholars believe that because Andrew and Simon had already taken up a career in fishing, that they had already been determined as unqualified to become *talmidim*. They were not the elite or the best of the best, they were simple fishermen that had a zeal for God's kingdom (as evidenced by their following John the Baptist), but were otherwise rejected from becoming official disciples through the established religious conventions. Jesus goes to their plan B, their lives as fishermen, and in a sense redeems them back into the life that should have always been: they become his disciples, to strive to walk like he does in every way possible.

It is with a certain sense of irony that these simple fishermen would later become foundational to the church. Simon, in particular, is later dubbed the rock on which Jesus would build his church. In I Corinthians 1:26-29 Paul says,

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are.

God loves choosing the rejects and the lowly of the world to do great things for him.



RELATED VERSES

John 1:35-42
I Corinthians 1:26-29

DISCUSSION STARTER

The idea of lovable nerds in Hollywood is quite popular currently. Name some examples in movies and TV. Why is this the case?

QUESTIONS

Name examples where this idea of God choosing the least to become great holds true—perhaps friends or acquaintances you know that have gone on to do good things in life.

What about American culture seems to negate the idea of God choosing the lowly and rejected for his service?

How does God choosing the lowly relate to his role as the great story-teller? Why does God like doing this?

Do we ever reject the lowly and despised from service in God's kingdom?

How does the idea of God choosing the lowly relate to your own calling?

ACTION STEP

Acknowledge your own deficiencies before God and thank him that he loves you, and chose you, in spite of them.



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WEEK TWO NOTES



WEEK 3 :: SEPTEMBER 19

WHEN CHURCH GETS CRAZY :: MARK 1:21-28

Everyday each of us plays a unique part in the structures of authority upon which society exists. It's everywhere. In school, at work, in politics, in the church. There is no evasion of it in the culture in which we live today. And in many ways, this is a very, very good thing. There has to be some form of political authority, for example, or government structures couldn't exist and anarchy would probably result (kind of like in some of the chaotic killing grounds we call nations, like Somalia).

But what of the ultimate authority of Kingdom?

Jesus based his authority on divine principles, not on human precepts that prove to be illusory and transient. We, as image bearers, often choose to forgo the divinity from which we were fashioned as we sacrifice our true power for the authority offered by empire and culture.

The desire for fame.

The pursuit of power.

The need for "success."

But our true power lies in powerlessness. Consider the many 12-step programs assisting addicts today; the world has produced countless stories of healing and new life through the foundational concept of powerlessness over addiction. It is only in relinquishing power that we gain it, illogical as it may seem. Yet in this world of contradiction, paradox reigns, life exists in the tension, and in loss, there is true gain.

The only authority that is enduring and fruitful is the ability to choose love as Jesus did. In the face of mocking, he chose meekness. In the face of persecution, he chose peace. In the face of crucifixion, he chose compassion. His actions are all rooted in love. It is fascinating to recognize that these deeply forgiving and compassionate acts are what Jesus chose in response to the most acutely violent, evil, and insufferable acts ever perpetrated against him. To these, he responded with true authority: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34)

The greatest suffering a human has ever endured elicited a response of the greatest love and forgiveness ever witnessed, and in that, the greatest power and authority the cosmos had ever experienced.

There will always be friction to contend with both against our egos and against society as we make choices and take actions that exhibit divine authority. We may not go to the cross for this, but we will indeed suffer small crosses as a result of resisting norms and choosing another way. And we must remind ourselves that true power and true authority carry with them weighty responsibility. Yet it is clear that in living authentic lives as followers of the gospel, emulating



Christ is our only option, as he is the trunk from which grow the boughs of sacrifice, the limbs of hope, the leaves of abundant life.

RELATED VERSES

Mark 21:28
Luke 23:34

DISCUSSION STARTER

Where have you seen true authority on display recently? What did it look like? How did it make you feel?

QUESTIONS

How are authority and paradox related? What does Jesus' life tell us about true authority?

How do you think fear and shame are related to the abuse of power?

What does the way in which a person utilizes their authority say about their inner state of being?

What are we perhaps afraid to admit about our own desires for fame, power, or success? How do we try to integrate these desires into our daily faith journeys?

ACTION STEP

Since we are humans living in a broken world, some of our actions will hint of the world's false authority, not the true authority of love. This week, look at specific areas of your life where this is happening. Accept it. Forgive yourself. Then adjust that practice to a practice of true authority—perhaps in apologizing to an employee, listening to your child, or helping someone in need.



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WEEK THREE NOTES



WEEK 4 :: SEPTEMBER 26

TAKE TWO OF THESE AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING :: MARK 1:29-34

Lord, just let me get through this next day.

This next week.

This next month.

This next year.

How many times do you find yourself thinking this way, asking God just to help you endure a given circumstance or season?

Oftentimes when things get too busy, hectic, or out of control, I grit my teeth and power through life, expecting that some time in the future I will emerge refreshed and content. I concentrate on surviving my life so that at some point I might find my circumstances changed for the better.

The problem is that while we wait for God to deliver us into the next phase of life, we may find that we've lived our lives waiting for the next, without ever being present in our own reality. We may let relationships wither and die, aspirations wane, or find that we've been waiting for something we wouldn't even recognize to start living our lives. Maybe we just accept that this world is broken and that the best we can do is look forward to eternity.

This happens a lot in our culture, even among those who count themselves as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Many of us seem content to just ride out this earthly existence, storing up our treasures in heaven. We grin and bear the ups and downs of life while experiencing a certain detachment to the ebb and flow of everyday living. We keep seeking the "next" while remaining aloof to the "now".

Jesus' ministry, however, was firmly rooted in the earthly life he and those around him were living. In fact, Jesus seemed intent on improving the lives of those around him. The gospels are full of stories of Jesus' healing power. He brought sight to the blind, restoration to the leprous, and life to the dead.

What strikes me as I read about Jesus' healing is that in order to heal those around him he had to put himself in a position where he was available to them. He had to see the blind, hear the deaf, touch the leper to bring his restoration. He did not choose to look forward to his future (as important as that was) at the expense of those around him in his midst.

How different would our lives look if we were characterized as those who saw the world around us, the beautiful and the repulsive, the refreshing and the draining, and chose to fully live in it's midst. If we sought healing for our deepest wounds now and helped to bring healing to others.



What if this life is as much about Christ's healing now, both receiving it and dispensing it, as it is about getting to heaven?

RELATED VERSES

Mark 2:16-17

Matthew 35:31-45

DISCUSSION STARTER

Have you ever met somebody who was consistently present at all times? How did you know? What was her/she like?

QUESTIONS

What are the benefits of being present in each moment? Why is that so hard for us? How could we better practice presence?

Have you ever had the experience of being able to bring Christ's healing to another person through your actions? What did you do to put yourself in that position?

Jesus was often criticized for associating with tax collectors (crooks) and sinners (Mark 2:16-17). Are there groups of people in our present context that we might have a hard time bringing Jesus' healing to because of how it would make us look?

In Matthew, Jesus gives the famous parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 35:31-45). How does this inform our understanding of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to serve, and what it means to get to heaven?

ACTION STEP

In one activity each day for a week, intentionally focus. If it's playing with your child, think of only that. Reading a book, consider only the words before you. If it's a conversation with a friend, intently concentrate on what they are saying. Make presentness an intentional practice.



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WEEK FOUR NOTES