



RESOURCES

Mark



St Philips

Mark

CONTENTS

This series is called KINGDOM PEOPLE.

We'll be looking at the first 9 chapters of Mark's gospel and the series will take us on a journey of discovering who Jesus is and who God says we are; we'll see that the Kingdom work of Jesus reveals to us the character of God; we'll think about the enemy's opposition to the Kingdom and our authority in Christ as Kingdom People to rebuke and defeat him; and we'll learn that walking in great authority and power is not about finding a formula but about intimacy and sacrificial love.

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- Timing: 20-40 minutes, then leading into prayer/ministry
- Buzzgroups: Groups of 3-4 work best, there are feedback notes for the speaker
- Illustrations: Where relevant, suggestions are made but speaker's own stories are preferable
- Approach: Use these resources to curate and steer group discussion, rather than seeing this material as a talk to delivery straight.
- Trust the group discussion to create an environment for mutual growth, deepening relationships and intimate encounter with the Spirit. Feel free to tailor and pitch the talk as best suits your group.
- "Go Deeper": Suggestions for deeper exploration are noted.
- Ministry notes: Follow the Spirit but suggestions are included if desired.

WEEK 4 DISCERNMENT

Last week we looked at what the Kingdom reveals about the character and priorities of God. We noted that the spirit of religion is always in opposition to the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

During this series we have looked at **identity, authority, intimacy** and the **Kingdom**.

In the last session (Mark 2:1- 3:6 The Kingdom of God and the Spirit of religion) we observed that the Kingdom of God reveals the nature of the Father and that the spirit of religion is working in constant opposition to this.

In this session we focus on Jesus' growing ministry (including his selecting and commissioning of the 12 apostles) and how, when accused of insanity by his own family and demonic possession by the religious leaders he responds with truth, wisdom and discernment. We note that discernment is a fruit of intimacy and results in us walking in wisdom and authority.

Read: Mark 3:7-end

Context/Background

Jesus' ministry was growing rapidly and the crowds were overwhelming. At the same time Jesus had to make a huge decision around appointing his apostles whilst being misunderstood by his family and being accused by the religious leaders of being Satan.

Buzzgroups:

Discuss in groups of three (4 minutes): Our passage today gives us a hint of the pressure Jesus must have been under. While being fully God, he was also fully human so he must have been going through a lot of emotions at this point in his ministry. Discuss how Jesus may have been feeling and how his discernment in the interactions in our passage allowed him to navigate the difficulties facing him. Has there been a time when you have felt overwhelmed when having to make key decisions? How did you discern the right decision/resolution/action?

Feedback (3 minutes): It is important that we understand Jesus as a real, relatable human being. This is key to understanding the application of his life to our own. Try to draw out some real emotions that he may have felt when he was being attacked from all sides - not just the religious leaders but his closest family. Encourage people to share personal stories when they were in situations where they had to really discern the will of God rather than the opinions of family, friends or 'the world'. (Use your own a personal story). It might be worth discussing how discernment is very often something that we need to do in difficult situations, when we really need to rely on

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God's wisdom and not our own. Note that when times are tough we often do the opposite - which in reality makes spiritual discernment much more difficult.

- Jesus's fame spreads (2:7-13)

This passage begins with Jesus taking a break from ministering to the religious leaders and withdrawing with his disciples to the sea. The crowd that usually follows him has grown even bigger and people are coming from all over Israel to hear from him and many with afflictions came to 'touch him' so they may be healed. The unclean spirits were even testifying to his identity - crying out that he was the 'son of God' (2:11).

- Appointing 12 Apostles (2:13-20)

Jesus discerns that his ministry is moving into a new season as he is getting more known. He goes up on a mountain and calls to himself 12 whom he 'desired' to be his Apostles. This is a significant moment in his ministry and it's not a coincidence that it starts by Jesus going up a mountain. Mountains are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible and are symbolic of being 'closer to God'. God often reveals himself on the mountaintop. So at this moment, Jesus is in deep communion with the Father - this next phase of his ministry, again, comes out of intimacy. The discernment that he shows throughout our reading is a fruit of intimacy.

The 12 that Jesus chose moved from being part of the community that followed Jesus to becoming Apostles, meaning "sent ones", 'He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons' (vs 14-15). **As Jesus' discernment to chose the 12 derived from His intimacy with Abba, so the apostles (appointed to that same intimacy) will carry the same discernment and authority.**

And just as God had chosen surprising people to carry out his purposes throughout the Old Testament, Jesus picks an unlikely group of people to be his hands and feet: from brothers to businessmen to people with opposing political viewpoints (eg. Matthew the Roman tax collector and Simon the Roman-hating zealot). The world's measures would never have resulted in this selection of people - but Jesus is not discerning with worldly wisdom: **discernment is not about worldly measures of wisdom but the Spirit's testimony to truth.**

- Jesus misunderstood by his family and religious leaders (2:26-30)

Note how at this pivotal point in his ministry Jesus' identity is being attacked: his family think he has gone insane and the religious leaders accuse the Holy Spirit in him of being the demon 'Beelzebub.' Jesus tells them a parable (vs 23-28). He describes

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a strong man's (the devil) house (the world) and his plunder (mankind) stating that the strong man must first be bound up before his goods can be plundered. In this parable Jesus is revealing his authority over Satan and his **identity** as Messiah by referencing his fulfilment of the scripture Isaiah 49:24-25. Jesus is able to respond to the attack on his identity by drawing on that identity and rebuking the lies thrown at him.

- Redefining what it means to be Jesus' family (2:31-36)

The chapter concludes with Jesus' family wanting him to come to them. He responds with a question: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?', and answers: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother'. Jesus says that our identity is evidenced by our alignment to our Father's will. As we pursue intimacy with Abba, so we grow in our identity as his children. We exhibit his likeness, we do his will. Just as Jesus did his Father's will by giving up everything for us.

In the Kingdom, our identity is defined not in the flesh but in the Spirit. As we continue to explore below what discernment is, we will discover that just as our identity does not reside in the flesh neither does our measure of wisdom.

1. Why do we need to be Discerning?

Having looked at the biblical context of our passage and noted the attack on Jesus' identity and ministry, we now consider more fully Jesus' response and how we can grow in discernment.

Discernment -

We live in a society in which almost any and every religious opinion, philosophy, and worldview is tolerated. While we are called to honour everyone and accept people's rights to their own opinions, it should not mean that we, as children of God, uncritically accept every religious teaching or worldly opinion as equally valid.

Discernment is distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, sound and unsound, truth and error through the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Spirit reveals and teaches the truth that is from God (John 14:26; 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:13-14). He also witnesses to our spirits the deep truth of our adoption as Abba's children (Romans 8:16). **It is out of this spiritual revelation that we are meant to discern and act.**

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In this passage we can see Jesus has discernment when dealing with the crowds (vs 7-12), appointing the apostles (vs 13-19) and dealing with the religious leaders (vs 20-30) and his family (vs 31-35).

The Bible says that God is pleased when his children are discerning. There are many references to discernment. In the Old Testament, the sons of Issachar discerned the times and knew what Israel should do (1 Chron. 12:32). The New Testament teaches that every Christian should be discerning: "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thess. 5:21). Paul writes to the Philippians: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ"

Failure to distinguish between truth and error leaves us vulnerable to false teaching and spiritual deception. This leads to an unbiblical mindset and decision-making that is not rooted in our identity as Abba's children. It leads us away from the truth and robs us of intimacy with our Father. The result is a life separated from the Father's will (v. 35) that does not bear the fruit he intends for it to bear. The religious leaders were lacking in intimacy with God and as such, they did not recognise his work in Jesus (v. 22), nor did they understand the Father's will - a key marker of discernment and a feature of being a child of God in intimate relationship with him (v. 35).

We need to grow in spiritual discernment because Satan is alive and well, actively promoting error at every opportunity. 1 John 4:1 reads: "Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

- For Christ there is antichrist (1 John 4:3).
- For true prophets there are false prophets (1 John 1:4:1).
- For true apostles there are false apostles (1 Cor. 11:13).
- For wheat there are tares (Matt. 13:24-30).
- For sheep there are wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15).
- For the Holy Spirit and holy angels there are unclean spirits (1 Tim. 4:1).

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Buzzgroups:

Discuss in groups of three (4 minutes): Have you thought about discernment before? Why do you think it is important to be discerning? What do you think it means to be discerning?

Feedback (2 minutes): Get the group to share some thoughts on the area of discernment. Try to gather some threads from the feedback before stating that we will now take a look at how we can develop and practice discernment.

2. How can we develop and practice discernment

To think in a discerning way is to think in a Kingdom way. There is no formula for developing discernment, but the Bible gives us clues for how we can grow in discernment. Here are 4 basic principles of how we can grow in discernment:

- **Be Spirit lead**

Discernment is spiritual. It is from God's Spirit and not from humans. We need to be receptive to the gentle nudges of the Spirit, confessing that our natural abilities are ultimately inadequate. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom".

Central to the work of the Spirit in us is his witness to us that we are children of God (Romans 8:14): he confirms in us our identity as God's children. In Session 2 we noted that authority flows from this identity. **In the same way discernment also flows from our identity as God's children.** We discern from a place of knowing who the Father is and who we are in him. This was the foundation of Jesus' discernment in our passage. It was the basis for his parable at vs 23-28, in which, we have already noted, he conveyed his authority and identity.

So, the key to discernment is recognising that what reflects the Father's character will witness to our identity in Him and what reflects the enemy will witness against the Father's identity in us. Whatever we are facing - a difficult decision or a manifestation of something spiritual - can be discerned as 'of the Father' or 'of the enemy' by us operating out of our intimacy with Abba. The Spirit witnesses to our spirit that it does or does not reflect the Father's nature. If it is of our Father, the Spirit of adoption who lives in us will witness that it is of our Dad. In the same way, the Spirit of adoption will

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push against anything that is not compatible with our nature as Abba's children. But the key is intimacy. You have to know God to know whether something is of him or not.

- **Be Biblical**

The Bible is able to help us in "discerning the thoughts and intentions of (our own) heart". Discernment grows from reading the Bible often and paying careful attention to what God is saying to us through it by his Spirit. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

- **Be Prayerful**

Discernment comes from spending time with God. We see this at the beginning of Mark 3 when Jesus 'withdrew' to spend time with his Father. We have noted before in our sessions that very often Jesus did what he did straight out of a time of prayerful intimacy with his Father. We need to ask God for discernment and wisdom in our lives, just like King Solomon did. In James 1:5 it says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.". The point of intimacy is that the deeper we go with Abba, the more we understand of his will for our lives and the more we trust him that his will is for our good!

- **Be alert**

The Bible warns us that there will be many false prophets and false teachers, that will deceive even the elect. People who's job it is to detect counterfeit bank notes are trained to know what the real bank notes look like so that it will be easier to spot a fake ones - they do not study the fake ones. In the same way, we need to know what the word of God, the character of God and the fruits of the Spirit are so that we can discern what the opposite is.

Being alert is not about searching for the enemy in every situation but about being so intimate with our Father that the enemy's deceptions and tricks are blindingly obvious when we are faced with them.

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Buzzgroups:

Discuss in groups of three followed by feedback (3 minutes): Are there any examples you can think of where you had to be spiritually discerning? How practically can you grow stronger in this area?

Feedback (3 minutes): Try to draw out stories of when people had to ask God for wisdom. Also encourage them to think about how they can use some of the above strategies for developing more discernment. **Emphasise that these strategies are really just different articulations of the central importance of growing in intimacy with Abba.**

Try to discuss the difference between making a decision about life and discerning the spiritual dynamic in a situation. The former may simply be a case of asking God to reveal his plan for you, the latter may be a situation in which you need to test whether something is of God or the enemy. In that case, God may be asking you to rebuke the enemy with the authority he has made available to you.

3. Discerning by the Spirit vs by the Flesh

It is sometimes hard to discern if we are being led by the 'flesh' or by the 'Spirit'. Paul writes in Galatians: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."

The flesh is self-centered, self-concerned and seeks self-preservation. The flesh attempts to live through self-reliance. The focus of the flesh is: how does this circumstance benefit me? What keeps me on top? What makes me feel good? How can I get my way? When coupled with the religious spirit (Session 3) it asks: what can I do to be acceptable to God? We see this approach in the religious leaders in our passage. Despite seeing evidence of demons being defeated, they discern with the flesh and are driven by self-preservation. Their conclusions are entirely wrong.

Thankfully, Jesus destroyed our self-centered flesh on the cross and replaced it with the life and love in His very own Spirit. The Spirit of Christ – the carrier of divine life and love – is contrary to the self-centered human spirit. Because of this, we are called to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). Everything about the Spirit of God testifies against the wisdom of the world and the truth of who Jesus is.

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Buzzgroups:

Discuss in groups of three followed by feedback (3 minutes): We all do things that are lead by our own flesh and not by the Spirit. Can you discuss some personal examples in your groups?

Feedback (3 minutes): Try to get people to be as real as they can. This buzzgroup is a great opportunity to unpack what today's material might look like practically in the lives of the people in the group. It's a safe space to talk about fleshly desires and maybe the group can see that everyone at some point falls short from walking with God or is deceived by worldly teaching. Conclude by encouraging everyone that while flesh-reliance leads us away from God, he, because he is our Father, loves to welcome us home.

Conclusion

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He completely embodies truth and we can see that throughout his ministry he was always discerning what was the perfect will of God in every situation. He did this out of intimacy with his Father which revealed to him the nature of God and confirmed his own identity in Abba. This identity was the foundation of his discernment and the gateway to spiritual wisdom. As followers of Jesus we are called to rely on his Spirit to guide us and give us wisdom in all situations so we too can discern what is true and not be deceived by what is false.

- We need to spend time with God so that we walk in our identity in him
- We need to ask God for wisdom and discernment as fruits of intimacy with Abba
- We need to live by the Spirit and not by our flesh
- We need to know the Bible well so that we can know what is counterfeit teaching and so we can measure all teaching against the nature and character of Abba.

Discernment is a fruit of intimacy. It releases wisdom, authority and Kingdom power. Discernment positions us to rebuke the devil and his false teaching about the character of God and allows us to understand the will and purposes of the Father for our lives in every situation we might face.

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Prayer/ministry

Ministry is most effective when it flows from conversations within the Home Group during the evening and the Spirit's witness. That said, here are some suggestions:

- Ask the Spirit to give the gifts of discernment and wisdom. The Bible says if anyone lacks wisdom then ask God for it.
- Get into small groups and pray about areas in your lives that need wisdom and discernment. Maybe if anyone has the gift of discernment then they can share about how they use it and then practice it during this time of prayer. They will be well placed to pray for others to receive it.
- Enjoy a time of soaking in the Spirit and ask for a download from the Father of his character and will for your lives.