



RESOURCES

Mark



St Philips

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.

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.

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WEEK 3 THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE SPIRIT OF RELIGION

Last week we explored Jesus' authority to advance the Kingdom of God and deliver people from sickness and the enemy, and how our identity as children of the same Father bestows on us the same authority.

Introduction

So far this term we have looked at **identity** - as adopted children of God we share the same identity as His Son; **authority** - our identity bestows on us the same authority as His Son, it is with this authority that we are able to do what Jesus did; and intimacy with our Father - which is key to understanding our identity and growing in authority.

In this session we look at what the Kingdom reveals about the character and priorities of God. We note that the **spirit of religion** is always in opposition to the Kingdom of God. We look at why this is the case and what it means for us.

Read: Mark 2:1-3:6

Context/background

Throughout this passage we see Jesus pitting the things of the Kingdom against the prevailing religion of the day. He deliberately goes right to the heart of it - teaching in the synagogue, addressing the teachers of the law directly, hanging out with 'sinners' and healing on the Sabbath. All the while He is squaring up to the religious spirit and revealing the entirely opposing focus of the Kingdom of His Father.

The target of Jesus' rebukes, frustration and, we read at 3:5 anger, are the Pharisees and 'teachers of the law'. They taught the law given to Moses through constant repetition, so that it would be "fixed" in the people's minds. They demanded absolute reverence, even more than the honour their students would have had for their own fathers. As such they were held in high esteem and their influence was huge.

To give them credit, they were well-intentioned. After centuries of the endless cycle of God's people turning away from Him and coming back to Him only to turn away again (see everything in the Old Testament from Genesis 3!) - they were determined to keep the law to the letter. But keeping the law to the letter quickly becomes legalism. The object of the law becomes more important than the subject. It is about how to do it rather than why and for whom.

Their teaching had become a distortion of the original purpose of the law. Rather than understanding the law as the means for living in right relationship with their gracious God, as His chosen people who were blessed by Him so that they could be a blessing to the world (Gen 12:1-3), their interpretation and practice of the law resulted in the opposite.

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They saw the law as a reason to exclude those who were not part of the covenant people of God. Rather than welcoming outsiders, they ostracised them - refusing to eat or socialise with them and calling them 'sinners'. Legalism is the opposite of relationship and so it results in the breakdown of relationship rather than the deepening of it.

So, in steps Jesus - eating with 'sinners', healing on the Sabbath, publicly rebuking their teaching, correcting their understanding of God and openly challenging their influence. No wonder He kicked up a storm!

1. The Kingdom and the nature of God

The teachers of the law believed that they had a monopoly of knowledge on the nature and character of God but everything Jesus does in our passage reveals the true nature and character of God. The Kingdom reveals the character of God.

Buzzgroup:

Discuss in groups of 3 (5 minutes): Identify the activities of the kingdom that Jesus is demonstrating in the passage. What do these say about the character of God?

Feedback (3 minutes): try to draw out healing (2:11, 3:5), associating with 'sinners' (2:15) and feeding the hungry on the Sabbath (2:24-26). Highlight that these activities demonstrate the character of a God who is open, welcoming, forgiving, compassionate, loving, not condemning and not interested in legalism.

The story of Jesus healing the paralytic man whose friends lower him through the roof is well known (2:1-12). At Sunday school we learn about Jesus healing sick people and the faith of the man's friends. These are important themes but there is more to it than that. The man is lowered into the centre of the room and right into the centre of what quickly becomes a theological boxing match between Jesus (in the Kingdom corner) and the teachers of the law (in the religion corner). This is not just about healing, it is about Jesus rebuking the religious spirit and revealing what God is really like.

The issue for the teachers of the law is Jesus' identity. Is He God? Jesus responds by openly declaring to the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven. Back then, illness was seen as a direct result of sin (something Jesus challenges later in John 9:3) and only God could forgive sins. Jesus very publicly declares the man forgiven (v. 5) and in doing so declares that He is God. (Note the equally public declaration at 3:3 - "stand up in front of everyone". Jesus is really seeking to challenge these religious

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leaders!). Such a declaration was considered blasphemous by the teachers of the law (v. 7). They respond by denying His divine identity.

But while their issue is about divine identity, Jesus is concerned with a connected but more subtle theological question. He is concerned not just with the identity of God but the character of God - something that the teachers of the law have totally failed to understand, for all their learning. Their focus has been divine identity and religion; but Jesus is asking them to focus on divine character and relationship.

Religion: concerned with who God is and what we have to do to please Him.

Kingdom: concerned with what God is like and entering into relationship with Him.

Jesus' point is that you may say that you know God but unless you know what He is like - His character, priorities, purposes - then you do not really know Him and you are not in the kind of relationship with Him that He wants.

Jesus is reminding the teachers of the law that God is not interested in religious observance but in relationship that transforms. He wants them to recognise that His desire for them is not to strive to please God but to pursue relationship with Him. A relationship that redeems us all back to Him and restores us to His likeness. The Kingdom work of Jesus reveals a God whose whole focus is lovingly to restore us to our pre-Genesis 3 selves - who He created us to be, His friends.

Buzzgroup:

Discuss in groups of 3 (3 minutes): Why did Jesus go around healing the sick?

Feedback (3 minutes): try to steward a conversation about healing and its significance in the Kingdom. Healing is something that speaks deeply of the Kingdom priorities of God. Jesus deliberately connects healing to the forgiveness of sins. This is because the restoration of our bodies is a sign of the restoration of our relationship with God. Healing is a foretaste, a glimpse, a trailer, a glorious spoiler for the real work of the Kingdom: our total restoration to Abba.

We are beginning to see the difference between the Kingdom and the spirit of religion. We have noted that the Kingdom reveals the character and priorities of our Father. When Jesus healed the sick, ate with 'sinners' and put the needs of others above religious observance of the Sabbath, He was very deliberately revealing the things that are important to God.

Jesus' demonstration of the Kingdom has much to tell us about how we engage in

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the Kingdom's advance. We are not called to serve out of obligation - because we are Christians and it is something we ought to do. Nor do we serve out of pride - to be seen to be doing the right thing. Both are manifestations of the religious spirit. Both are carried out in our own strength. Neither reflect the character of God. We are called to a Kingdom life that always testifies to His love and compassion.

Buzzgroup:

Discuss in groups of 3 (3 minutes): What happens when we begin to understand what the Kingdom has to say about the character of God? In what ways might the reality of who God is and His priorities change how we view the world?

Feedback (2 minutes): try to reflect again on the character points you drew out in the first buzzgroup and start to discuss what this might look like practically for the Connect Group. Social transformation, homeless shelters, reaching out to the lonely or isolated, welcoming new people into your group, practicing compassion in the workplace etc. Note that we do not do these things out of religious obligation (in our own strength and therefore exhausting) but as a reflection of the priorities of our God with whom we are in a transforming relationship. Suggest how serving/outreach is not, therefore, something to add to the 'to-do' list when we have time but something that is an overflow of our every-day relationship with Abba.

Go Deeper: Jesus is not teaching new things in our passage today. He is seeking to remind the teachers of the law of the character of God that has remained unchanged throughout the ages. Their focus on religion had blinded them to what God really wanted them to focus on. Take a look at Isaiah 58. Discuss the features of religion that do not appeal to God in vs 1-5 and what comes into focus when our relationship with God transforms how we see the world with His perspective at vs. 6-10.

2. The religious spirit always opposes the Kingdom

As the Kingdom always witnesses against the spirit of religion, so the spirit of religion always opposes the Kingdom of God. The reason is clear: the Kingdom reveals the character of God and the enemy does not want people to come into a knowledge of just how good and compassionate and loving He is.

We see the reality of this agenda in the different reactions of the people in our passage. 2:12 - what happens when people who are open to God see what He has done and come into an understanding of what He is like? **They praise Him.** Praise is the natural response to coming into deeper revelation of God and deeper

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relationship with Him.

Just what the enemy does not want. Now look what happens when the spirit of religion succeeds in blinding those who have seen a demonstration of the Kingdom. 3:6 - right in front of their eyes the teachers of the law see a paralysed man walk (2:11) and a shrivelled hand restored (3:5) but instead of praising God - instead of coming into greater revelation and deeper relationship - they deny the revelation and seek to destroy the relationship - they plot to kill Jesus.

This is a significant insight into the agenda and activity of the spirit of religion. The religious spirit led to Jesus' death and, in the same way, it leads to our spiritual death. This is why we must rebuke it as Jesus did. Gal 3:9-10 says this: "...those who rely on faith (i.e. believe in Jesus like the friends in v. 5 of our passage) are blessed...(while) those who rely on the works of the law (i.e. the things we do in our own strength in an effort to please God, like the Pharisees) are under a curse." This verse in Galatians is saying that the law cannot save us, we cannot save ourselves by religious observance. Ultimately doing this is cursed, it leads to spiritual death.

But this is the curse that Jesus broke on the cross so that we need not die. Jesus came that we might have life and life to the full (John 10:10). We rebuke the spirit of religion by believing in Jesus, accepting that He has done what is needed for us by grace and pursuing a freely available relationship with the Father, through Him in the power of the Spirit. In that relationship we walk in identity and authority. We are not called to religion; we are called to relationship.

When Jesus revealed the character of God through declaring the Kingdom in word and action, those who had eyes to see realised who God was and praised Him. Those blinded by the spirit of religion saw a reason to kill. Their method reflected the spirit in which it was done - religious legalism that required a court room and demanded justice and punishment. This is the opposite of God's grace in Christ.

The religious spirit leads to death, the Kingdom leads to relationship and life.

Buzzgroup:

Discuss in groups of 3 (3 minutes): The teachers of the law react with anger throughout our passage. Jesus also reacts with anger at 3:5. What is the difference?

Feedback (1 minutes): try to conclude the feedback by noting that anger that is caused by the spirit of religion results in destructive intent and spiritual death - as discussed above - but Jesus' anger is a righteous anger, an anger that rebukes the

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spirit of religion. Religious anger results in the diminishing of the subject of the anger. Righteous anger results in a revelation of the character of God and, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, a deepening of relationship with God. It therefore edifies, releases hope and brings life.

3. The Kingdom and us

The spirit of religion opposes the Kingdom because the enemy does not want people to know how good, compassionate and loving God is. What is the implication of this for us?

It comes back to our **identity** and **authority**. The Kingdom reveals God's character and so it has much to say about who we are as His children. **So the religious spirit's opposition to the Kingdom is really an attack on our identity.** The enemy does not just want to stop the Kingdom's advance, he wants to stop our advance! He does not want the children of God walking in identity, authority and Kingdom power, declaring the true character of their good, compassionate and loving Dad! He doesn't want people to come into that revelation and that relationship. He doesn't want people praising God because they finally understand what He is like.

He wants us crippled by religion - inwardly-focussed, judgmental, divided and legalistic, protecting the form of our religious way of life rather than walking in power.

Conclusion

When people understand the Kingdom, they understand God. When they understand God, they understand that He is their Dad. When they understand that He is their Dad, they understand that they are His kids. When they understand that they are His kids, they understand who they are. And when they understand who they are, the enemy hasn't a chance.

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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:

- Pray for a Kingdom revelation of the Father's character - ask for a download of compassion and love.
- Rebuke the spirit of religion. This may include repenting of the areas of your lives where you carry the religious spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to redeem those areas and show you what it might look like to walk in Kingdom identity.
- Intercede for the world - ask the Spirit to give you a heart for the lost.