

Mark 1:1-8

MP: Prepare the way of the Lord through repentance

FCF: We wander in the wilderness rather than turning our hearts to God

CC: Jesus, the greater prophet, comes to serve us, by baptizing us with His Spirit

INTRO

I. Welcome + turn to Mark 1 which is p. 836 in your pew bible + pray

II. Expectations are a funny thing. When you have an expectation, you have a confident assumption or a belief about the way things *should* go.

- A. We all have them. Every single one of us have expectations about how things should go or what will happen. I know this because I've been serving in music ministry for the past 20 years.
- B. Parents tend to expect things of their kids: that they should follow certain rules or make certain life decisions. And in some regard they prepare you with those expectations in mind most of your life.
 - 1. Their expectations could be low - they expect that you'll "stay out of jail", hopefully marry someone they don't dislike, or at least not become a politician.
 - 2. Or their expectations could be high - they expect that you will "crush it at an incredible university, become a high powered lawyer, and move to a city center of influence, but hopefully not too far away" - *in this room that one might sound familiar...*
 - 3. Your parents are no exception to expectation rule - we all have expectations.
- C. For instance, if you live in Northern Virginia, then all of us have at least one major expectation in common. One confident belief about the way things will go: that when NOVA meteorologists say that a snowstorm is coming, the roads will not get treated in any way, shape or fashion.
- D. In fact, very little preparations will occur at all, except by its own citizens who purchase toilet paper and groceries as though they had none to begin with. Prepare the way, for the snow shovel, and your back, to do 90% of the work.
 - 1. I really don't fault them that much (except last winter when every overcrowded neighborhood street around here was reduced to one lane because of snowcrete stacks for like 2 months)
 - 2. No I don't fault them that much because I know one simple fact: they don't prepare, because they don't expect it to even snow in the first place.
 - 3. Why prepare - why waste the time pre-treating roads, getting trucks ready, hiring contractors, when DC snowstorms are like 25 year old bachelor uncles - they'll say they'll come, but once it gets close they've got somewhere else to be.

- E. When our expectations are high, we prepare. But when our expectations are low, we don't. Whether or not you prepare, is often tied to what you believe will happen. Because preparing for something, is directly connected to what you believe will happen.

III. Compare that to when you *know* someone is coming over for dinner. You have it on the calendar and they confirmed it with you.

- A. You prepare your schedule by clearing the margins around the dinner. You prepare your house by cleaning up, you prepare a meal by going to the grocery store and cooking.
- B. You prepare, because you have a confident belief, an expectation, a certainty that someone **is** coming.

IV. It is much the same in our walk with God — when we believe, trust, or have even the smallest mustard seed of faith that the Lord will arrive, we prepare for it. We know He will show up, so we get ready.

- A. But when our expectations are low, or our faith is weak, or our hearts are distracted by the arrival of something else, we don't prepare.
- B. If you're like me, maybe it's because we struggle to know what it even means to prepare for the Lord. How would I possibly prepare for God to show up in my life?
- C. This morning, we're going to look at a moment in the ministry of John the Baptist, through the Gospel of Mark. And we'll see in our passage a very simple exhortation: *prepare the way of the Lord*.

~ So first, we'll think about who was saying it, then we'll see what it actually means, and then we'll answer how do we do it. Prepare the way of the Lord - 1) who was saying it, 2) what it means, and 3) how do we do it. Let's first think about who was saying it. ~

WHO WAS SAYING IT — (v2-3; 6)

// A prophet, foretold by Isaiah & Malachi, to prepare the way of the Lord //

I. When John the Baptist arrives in 1st century Judea, it has been about 400 years since Israel last had a prophet sent by God — and his name was Malachi

- A. Malachi's ministry is recorded in the book by his namesake at the end of the Old Testament. He lived around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah - so after God had brought the people of Israel back to rebuild the temple and the wall after being exiled - around the 400s B.C.
- B. One of Malachi's prophecies is then quoted here in **Mark 1:2** (Mark attributes them both to Isaiah, probably more as a shorthand way of saying "the prophets" since Isaiah simply wrote so much)

1. So some 400 years prior to John the Baptist arriving, God is saying through the prophet Malachi - I will send my messenger. Here's the direct quotation from Malachi 3:1: *"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple;"*
- C. But Mark isn't done pointing out how this messenger is a fulfillment of prophecy. Because the second quotation in 1:3 is from the Isaiah, who wrote down his words some 300 years prior to Malachi! — **read**
Mark 1:3
1. Here's the quotation from Isaiah 40:3: *"A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*
2. Isaiah goes on to say that when this voice is crying out, the glory of the Lord will be revealed. In other words, the Messiah will come
- D. In both passages, Malachi and Isaiah, you see this same language - "prepare the way" for the Lord. And this messenger will be the one to do it

II. So, 700 years after Isaiah, and 400 after Malachi, a guy named John shows up.

- A. Luke's account in Luke 1 tells us that John was actually a relative of Jesus, and his parents both came from a priestly line, but they were unable to have kids. Until the Lord answers their prayers, and sends an angel to tell them that they will have a son, they should name him John, he's going to be great before the Lord, he's going to turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he's going to *"make ready for the Lord a people prepared"*. Oh and also he's going to come in the spirit of the prophet Elijah.
 1. Man, talk about some high expectations. The doctor just told us our kids were gonna be tall.
- B. The prophecy in Luke from the angel was pretty obvious except for that whole Elijah business - so what does that mean?
 1. Well, as it turns out, Malachi said that as well in chapter 4 - that the Lord will send *"Elijah the prophet"* who will turn the hearts of Israel before the Lord comes
 - a) In 1 and 2 Kings, there was a great prophet, named Elijah, who was constantly calling Israel to turn back to the Lord. To repent. That's pretty much what every prophet did.
 - b) As it turns out, he also spent a lot of time in the wilderness, he wore a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist, and had some peculiar wilderness diet moments. All of it was part of God saying through him, that he was set apart for the Lord.
 2. So then what do we find as a description of John the Baptist in Mark 1? **Read v4 + 6 - emphasis wilderness + diet**
 - a) So John was in the wilderness, wearing a garment of camel hair, a leather belt around his waist, and he was eating locusts and wild honey.

- b) I know some of you have tried eating local wild honey to help your runny nose allergies, but I dare you to baptize your diet and go full locust.
- c) The point is, John was doing all of that as a way setting himself apart for the Lord, in the same way that Elijah did.

III. So just like Malachi had foretold 400 years prior, John was the messenger, sent by God to tell the nation of Israel to prepare the way of the Lord

- A. Just like Isaiah had prophesied 700 years prior, John had been sent, crying in the wilderness to the nation of Israel, to make God's paths straight - to prepare the way of the Lord.
- B. And Just like Elijah who lived some 900 years prior, John was a prophet just like Elijah, set apart by God to tell people a particular message: to prepare the way of the Lord.

~ TRANSITION: But, what does it mean? What does it mean to "prepare the way of the Lord"? ~

WHAT IT MEANS — (v4-5)

// Make His paths straight by repentance: confess sins and turn to God //

I. Maybe we could answer that by looking at the specific message John was proclaiming - *read v4-5*

- A. First off, let's not miss the significance of John being out in the wilderness to proclaim his message
 - 1. Really, all of the major prophets spent some time in the wilderness, and each of the times the Lord would take them out there, it was to symbolize in some way that Israel was in a spiritual wilderness and had lost its way - they needed to turn back to the Lord
 - 2. You see, the first time Israel had wandered in a wilderness was when they made it their home for 40 years.
 - a) God had set them free from slavery to Egypt after 400 years, he brought them across the Red Sea, and gave them a cloud by day and fire by night to lead them through the wilderness desert on their way to the Promised Land.
 - b) But before long, they stopped worshiping their Creator and instead worshiped their captor. They created a god made of gold, just like the Egyptians had taught them, they complained about having to leave Egypt, and ultimately refused to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land for fear that God wouldn't save them in their battle against the peoples of Canaan.
 - c) Quoting the Lord in Numbers 14:11 *"How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"*

- d) As a result of Israel disbelieving in God, they end up wandering in the wilderness for 40 more years until that whole generation had passed away.
- 3. In John's day, Israel was still facing the same problem: a stiff-necked people who refused to trust the Lord - they were spiritually in a wilderness all over again.

II. So what was John's message specifically? V4 says that He was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and it says in v5 that everybody was coming out to him to get baptized in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

- A. Okay so let's break that down a bit so we can understand it a bit better - there's 4 key phrases I want us to understand: confessing sin, repentance, forgiveness of sin, and then baptism.

III. Confessing sin - John's message was clear to the Israelites: they had rebelled against the laws of the Lord; but more than that they had stopped worshiping Him.

- A. Sin is when God is no longer truly God over us. Instead of Him being the one who defines righteousness (or what is good and right), we do. This started in the very beginning when God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, when they chose their own desires over the Lord. Rather than obeying God's will, they broke His commandment and chose what they wanted instead.
 - 1. And because of this rebellion, which mankind continues in to this day, God has proclaimed a just punishment: death. Physical and eternal separation from this perfectly righteous, perfectly good God. Ultimately, getting what we, by our sin, say we want - no God.
- B. But that same God in His mercy, called Israel, and calls us, to confess our sin to Him. To actually admit to Him, that we are wrong. We have squandered our worship of Him. We have profaned the image of God in us by loving something, choosing something, making something greater in our eyes than Him.
 - a) But he actually doesn't just call us to simply acknowledge the sin by confessing it - He calls us to *repent*.

IV. Repentance - That's the core of John's message, really. Confession is right and appropriate, and a step toward repentance, but not the whole thing. What God calls us to is not to just acknowledge that we sinned and then go back and do it again. He calls us to repent.

- A. The word literally means to "change one's mind" - another use of it would be "to turn around" but in an all of life kind of way.
- B. God called Israel over and over, to repent, to confess their sins yes, but to then turn around their lives and face him.

C. Think of repentance as a sometimes fast, sometimes slow, process of acknowledging your sin before God and then choosing Him instead.

1. Repentance is realizing that the sin you were enjoying, or the sin that you were habitually choosing, or the sin you were stuck in that makes you feel ashamed— repentance is realizing that that sin is not worthy of your love, but the Lord is.
2. As an example, I have a 7 month old puppy right now - he's a 90 pound Swiss mountain dog named Moose. He's a great dog, except for when we're on a walk and he decides that he wants to sniff (and probably eat something) he shouldn't. Once his nose and eyes pick up on something that he wants, the walk and I are completely out of his mind. His face is to the ground and he will turn the opposite direction and plant his legs to stay put or pull if need be. I practically don't exist to him anymore.
 - a) Now as you can imagine, a half-grown 90 pound puppy has got some pull if he wants it.
3. Thankfully, with some training, and on the best of days and for the sake of my illustration, when I say "leave it" or "come", he lifts his head back up, turns around and realizes this is actually the way to go, it's better for me if I follow Brian...turns out, it hasn't worked for my kids yet.

D. When we confess our sin, we're acknowledging that what we're chasing is wrong. Repentance is when we turn to face the Lord and start walking with Him knowing that His way is better.

V. So what does repentance lead to? Forgiveness. When we confess our sin, proclaim Him as Lord, we are forgiven.

- A. God declares that our sin is forgiven and paid for, and we are declared righteous
- B. Our shame can be washed away because God has separated our sin as far as the east is from the west. He remembers it no more and we can live, set free—no longer wandering in the wilderness but instead enjoying the promised land of fellowship with our God
- C. This forgiveness is offered to us freely simply by faith, because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. He took sin upon himself, took the just punishment that we deserved - death.

VI. You see, John was proclaiming repentance to the people - to turn from their sin and to back to the Lord that they might be forgiven. And the sort of physical representation of them doing this was a kind of proto-baptism. It was a baptism for the repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

- A. John's baptism was an outward representation of people preparing the way for the Lord in their hearts: confessing their sins, turning to God to follow Him in anticipation of Him sending the Messiah

B. It's a proto-baptism because Christian baptism is a way of identifying with that Messiah who did come, Jesus, and his death, burial and resurrection - baptism is a demonstration of a person joining this covenant community of Christ - the church.

1. Acts 19 is instructive on this point: Paul shows up in Ephesus and meets some disciples who had gotten baptized in John's baptism, and Paul says in Acts 19:4 *"John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus."* Then he goes true baptist and he re-baptizes these guys in the name of the Lord Jesus.
2. John's baptism was different in that, Jesus hadn't arrived yet, this act of getting baptized was how the Israelites were demonstrating that they were preparing the way of the Lord - it was a way of expressing that they were repenting of their sin

VII. This begs the question, how do we prepare the way of the Lord?

- A. Obviously Jesus has already arrived in the temporal sense, and he lived, died and rose again 2000 some years ago. But He now lives forever in Heaven, he has sent us His Holy Spirit who lives within us, and He has promised that He will come back again
- B. So in a certain sense, this work of preparing the way of the Lord, is really a daily activity.
1. For starters, you and I know that the life of a Christian is marked by a posture of repentance.
 2. When we are confronted by sin through the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that sin before the Lord and turn back to Him.
 3. We prepare the way of the Lord daily, by walking out a life of repentance.

VIII. But perhaps more pointedly, how do I repent?

- A. You may be thinking to yourself - I've tried over and over again to turn from this sin, but yet I keep ending up in this same place.
- B. I have read the book, tried the strategies, met with the pastor, talked to the therapist, disciplined myself, cut stuff out, added stuff in, and nothing, nothing seems to make it all go away.
- C. Or maybe you're at a place where you're asking yourself, "why do I not even *want* to repent anymore?"

~ Transition: I mean, How do we do it, how do we prepare the way of the lord, how do we actually repent so that the Lord will arrive in our lives? I think the answer goes back to where we started this morning. Do you expect Him to arrive?

HOW DO WE DO IT — (v7-8)

// Jesus, the greater prophet, the true servant, who baptizes with the Holy Spirit //

I. You see, what we believe about something often dictates whether or not we're willing to prepare. What Mark 1 tells us, is that what you believe about who is arriving, will tell you a lot about how you should prepare.

A. And I don't have all of the answers - repentance is nearly always messy and drawn out because the Lord is patient with us, and is more interested in forming us than ticking a checkbox in us.

1. But what I do know, is that repentance always begins with faith - with recognizing the voice of your Maker.

II. And I think John gives us an incredible doorway to look through at this Messiah in v7 and 8 - Read v7a

A. John is saying that the one who is coming, will be mighty - He's saying I, John, pail in comparison to how incredible the Lord will be when He arrives

1. The author of Hebrews 1:1-3 has this to say to us: *"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,"*

a) The prophets could only point to the glory of God in the Messiah - but Jesus arrived and put it on display

2. Colossians 1:15-19, like a 1st century hymn to the church has this to say: *"15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"*

III. But John doesn't stop there at declaring how mighty He is - He says in v7: *"the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie"*

A. You know who normally did that job in 1st century Israel? The lowest of the servants. You know who washed His disciples feet? Jesus.

- B. Philippians 2 says it like this: *“(He) emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*
- C. Jesus was the true servant, who though He was mighty and deserved all honor and praise, laid His life down, so that we could be set free.

IV. But John doesn’t stop there, he continues in v8: *“I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

- A. He’s saying, this baptism I have done is insufficient. The true baptism that we all need, is to identify with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection, to be forgiven of our sin and given the gift of God’s Spirit within us. So that when God looks at us, He sees His Son in us.
- B. Romans 6:4 says *“4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*
- C. Or Galatians 2:20 says: *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”*
- D. The door that Christ opened for us, is that simply by faith in Him, we are given true salvation
- E. Not merely a proto-baptism or a daily purification, but a once for all, finished substitutionary sacrifice on the cross for us, so that we might be forgiven, declared righteous, and brought back into fellowship with our Creator who put us in the garden to begin with.

V. You see, that’s the Lord that we are preparing the way for when we repent, when we turn to Him.

- A. Whether or not we prepare is often based on what we believe. Do you believe in a mighty God? Do you believe in a God who became a servant? Do you believe in a God who loved you so much that he took the punishment you deserved so that you could have life?

VI. For some of you here today: maybe the Lord is just simply reminding you that everyday, is an opportunity to prepare the way of the Lord.

- A. Maybe that’s partly through just living a life that is marked by a posture of repentance. Quick to confess sin to the Lord, to your brothers and sisters in Christ, Quick to seek the Lord when you turn away.
- B. Maybe He’s just wanting to remind you that you can *expect Him to arrive*.
 1. He is faithful and always fulfills His promises. He is at work in your life, in your friend’s lives, in your kid’s lives and in the world. And He will arrive again in glory to make all things new.
 2. When your small group meets, by the power of His Spirit, the Lord is there and at work.

3. Anytime you gather for worship, prepare your hearts, knowing that the Lord will arrive - His Word will be read, His Spirit will convict, comfort, or awaken dead hearts.
4. When we prepare the way of the Lord, Hidden sin gets confessed, relationships get mended, people inherit salvation, and God's power is put on display.
5. Might the Lord be prompting you to daily remember that you *can expect Him*.

VII. Some of you here today, might not know if you're truly a Christian. But something is pulling at you, something has been knocking at the door gently in the background of life, telling you that there's something more.

- A. And I wonder, is it possible that the Lord himself may be preparing the way for His arrival in your life?
- B. And now, is saying to you, all of that stuff that you think will fulfill you - success in your job, the perfect amount of money, the right answers for everything going on in the world - it won't fulfill. It won't satisfy. It won't quell the ache in your heart for peace. Only God can truly do that.
- C. Maybe the Lord is calling you to prepare the way of the Lord: confess your sin to Jesus, and choose to follow Him as your Lord. Because He did arrive, He did make a way for salvation, and He will arrive again.

~ Allow me to pray for us as we close. ~