

IMITATING CHRIST

Mark's Gospel

This is a discussional guide. We encourage Connect Hosts to use the material in such a way you can meet your group where they are at. If this means adding, changing, or taking away from below, then do what you need to make this the most formational night for your group as we seek to become more like Jesus together.

IMITATING

WATCH

Either have your group watch our first video before joining together or start by watching video 1.

UNDERSTAND

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. – Mark 1:1

Mark's gospel is all about change – whether someone is willing to read the life of Jesus and change who they are to orient themselves around Him. Only once, does Mark personally tell his audience who Jesus is, in the opening line of the Gospel, and then proceeds to present His life to you. It's as if Mark is saying, "here is who I believe He is, now read the account of His life and decide whether or not you want to orient your life around him".

Mark describes his Lord as "Jesus Christ" and the "Son of God".

- Christ – meaning anointed, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word rendered "Messiah" is the official title of our Lord, occurring five hundred and fourteen times in the New Testament. It denotes that he was anointed or consecrated to his great redemptive work as Prophet, Priest, and King of his people.
- Son of God – The language of sonship in the New Testament communicates God's endorsement, commission, and empowerment of Jesus as the chosen king. When the Gospel authors spoke of Jesus as the Son of God, they may have intended the title in the sense of the Old Testament regal notion of a divinely chosen king. For example, God's voice of approval—my "beloved son"—spoken to Jesus at His baptism (Mark 1:11) has a verbal connection with Psalm 2:7 and hearkens to first-century Jewish messianic expectations and the Judaism of his time.

If this is who Jesus is, then we would do well to pay attention to His life and how we can orient our lives around Him. It is no surprise then, that Jesus finds disciples and asks them to come and follow him.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." – Mark 1:17

SHARE

From your experience in life, how does somebody change or become different to who they currently are?

Can you think of a time or circumstances in your life that have made you become more like Jesus?

If someone who did not know Jesus asked you to describe what it means to follow Him, what would you say?

UNDERSTAND

This series is titled “imitating Christ” because of Mark’s presentation of the life of Jesus and the question that hangs over our reading of it – “will we imitate the life of Christ?”

Imitation in the ancient world was the ultimate form of learning. Aristotle named his school of Philosophy the “Peripatetic School of Philosophy”. The reason for this is the Greek word, peripateō, meaning, “to walk”. This is the word Paul uses when telling those belonging to the churches in Galatia to “walk in the spirit” (Galatians 5:16).

Aristotle named his school of Philosophy, the walking school. This meant that his students followed him everywhere they went and watched how he engaged with the world. The ultimate form of learning was not in a classroom, it was done watching how their teacher engaged with the world and imitated this in their own lives.



Aristotle and his disciples in an 1888 fresco in the portico of the National University of Athens

Change happened in the life of Aristotle’s disciples and in the life of Jesus’s disciples by watching how he lived and imitating this in their own lives. This is still true for us today. As followers of Jesus who believe Him to be the “Christ” and the “Son of God”, we pay careful attention to His life and how He lived, how he deals with money, reputation, suffering, power and anything else, and we imitate this in our lives.

SHARE

Is there a difference between being an imitator of Jesus, and just simply being a Christian by label?

Some might say that Jesus is not physically with us today, so how can we imitate Him – how would you respond to this?

What role does Holy Spirit play in imitating Jesus’ life?

UNDERSTAND

As you now read through Mark's gospel, both through our Sunday morning preaching and in connect group you will see the life of Jesus presented by Mark confronting many different topics such as authority, dealing with the demonic, the need for baptism, miraculous healing, dealing with temptation, etc. However, in this series we have homed in on three main topics that Jesus addresses and invites those who choose to follow Him, to imitate. Three times in Mark's gospel Jesus predicts his death, and three times his disciples push back in a way that contradicts the way of Jesus. Each time, Jesus introduces us to a way of imitation.

- Suffering
- Serving
- Sacrificing

Over the next three times you gather your group, we will unpack what it means to imitate Jesus in these three areas.

PRAY

Pray as led, addressing the needs in the room.

You may want to ask Holy Spirit to reveal to you what He wants to address in your life as you read through Mark's Gospel and focus on being imitators of Jesus.

PART TWO:

SUFFERING

WATCH

Either have your group watch our second video before joining together or start by watching video 2.

READ

Mark 8:31–9:1

UNDERSTAND

Peter's view of the Messiah is aligned with many Jews who were waiting for a Nationalistic Messiah to come, conquer Rome and reestablish Israel as a world superpower. Peter is disgusted with the idea that the Messiah would suffer, so he tries to get the very one He follows to follow him into his way of living and understanding. Sound familiar?

In this very moment, Peter is confronted with one of the greatest obstacles to imitating the life of Jesus. Maybe because it causes so much confusion and questions, but how Jesus articulates suffering is challenging for any committed follower. **The danger when we face challenging aspects of following Jesus is we hope He will imitate us, rather than the other way around.**

It is not surprising that Peter reacts the way he does. Suffering is a hard topic, and we struggle to even know how to help others when they are struggling. Reflecting on the Church's role, Aubrey Sampson, from the Barna research group, explains, *"I don't think the Church has equipped people well to lament collectively, communally or individually... We have not led people well through suffering. We've led people well to the mountain top, but we have not led people well to see that God may actually be in the valley and there's an invitation there."*

Throughout church history, there has been some damaging views on suffering and Jesus. God does not cause suffering (read the opening chapter of the half-brother of Jesus, James 1:13–18) but we can expect following Him in a way where we lay our lives down can result in the suffering of the saints.

We must also hold a global perspective on Christianity. Although we are free to follow Jesus in the UK and Ireland, Christians in Iran and Sudan have recently been killed simply because they will not renounce their faith. In February 2015, twenty-one Coptic Christians were killed by ISIS on a beach in Libya. They were called "the people of the cross" and their final words recorded were "Jesus, help me". They had the option to accept Islam and be released but knowing what awaited them they chose the way of Christ.



SHARE

Why can suffering as a follower of Jesus be so challenging?

What does it mean to you to deny yourself?

How did Jesus deny Himself?

Has there been a time in your life where imitating Jesus meant “denying yourself”?

What do you understand Jesus to mean when he says “take up your cross and follow me”?
(The majority of those who imitate Jesus’ life will never carry a physical cross or be crucified)
So how do you apply this to your life?

Jesus says to take up your cross, but also that He will give abundant life (John 10:10) – how do you marry the two ideas of abundant life and co-suffering with Christ as his disciple?

PRAY

Extracts of "A prayer of Patrick (389–461) – Resolute Discipleship"

In the name of the protecting Father,

In the name of the conquering Son,

And in the name of the Liberating Spirit.

I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity.

I call all heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ. I choose no other Lord than the Maker of Heaven and earth. This day I walk with Him and He will walk with me.

I fasten close to me this day that same Jesus who came to us as flesh and blood and was Himself baptised in the Jordan river. He died upon a cross to rescue me, broke free from death, its conqueror.

He left us, to return the more certainly.

All these truths and their power I fasten close to me this day.

Resisting my own selfishness and sin,

refusing to live as a slave to riches, pleasure or reputation, rejecting Satan and all his lies,

I call on heaven to witness today that I have put on Christ.

In life's choices and circumstance watch over me and protect me.

- In my coming and going, in light and darkness, watch over me, and protect me.
- In hesitancy and fear, uncertainty and rebellion, watch over me, and protect me.
- In testing and pain, in danger and doubt, watch over me, and protect me.
- In all my beginnings, and at each ending, watch over me, and protect me.

I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead:

Christ be with me, within, behind me, God's eye to watch, God's might to stay, God's ear to hearken to my need:

Christ before, beneath, beside me.

The wisdom of my God to teach, God's hand to guide, God's shield to ward,

Christ be near me, Christ above me.

The word of God to give me speech, God's heavenly host to be our guard.

Christ in hearts of all that love me.

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me,

Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

In the name of the sacred Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

SERVING

WATCH

Either have your group watch our third video before joining together or start by watching video 3.

READ

Mark 9:30–37

UNDERSTAND

Once again Jesus speaks plainly about his death. This time the disciples are too afraid to ask questions about something they do not understand. **Note:** *This could be an opportunity to invite people into authenticity. God wants our questions and failure to do so means we miss vital understanding.*

Notice in v35 how Mark mentions that Jesus calls the twelve to him. This seems a contradiction as they are already with Him, but this is Mark's way of emphasising how important the statement Jesus is about to make is. If you want to understand something vital in being His follower, lean in.

We don't know the context for the disciples justifying their greatness amongst each other, but what we see is that Jesus reveals the secrets of what it is to live in His Kingdom. James Brooks says:

"The paradox of the gospel is that the way of service—the way of Jesus himself—is the way to true greatness."

Jesus redefines greatness. Not power, not the gathering of material goods or reputation – Jesus' definition for greatness is "service". The first being willing to be last.

Just like the ancient prophets, Jesus taught not only by his words but also by symbolic actions. His use of the child is an acted parable, a dramatised illustration. The meaning of the symbolic action cannot be grasped without recognition of the lowly place occupied by children in ancient society and a realisation that the same Aramaic word means both child and servant. A child in the Bible is both a symbol of innocence and of helplessness and vulnerability. In Mark 10:13–16 and in Matt 18:3–4 disciples are exhorted to become humble like a child, but here (and in Matt 18:5 and Luke 9:48) the child represents any helpless person whom the true disciple is to receive. To "welcome" or "receive" means to be concerned about, to care for, to show kindness to. To do so in the name of Jesus means to do as he would do, to do so for his sake, to do so as an imitator of Jesus. To accept and serve the outcasts and oppressed is a way of accepting both God and Jesus.

"Greatness in the kingdom consists not of position but of ministry".

SHARE

How would you define greatness?

Whether local, national or global, where have you experienced or where do you see the church being servants to those around them?

How did Jesus serve those who were around Him?

What is the greatest barrier to you becoming a servant “of all”?

What have you found helpful in becoming a servant “of all”?

Have you ever served when your heart is bitter or resent those you serve? How do you handle this? How can we serve in a way that is joy filled?

SHARE

Think how you as a group could pray and ask God how He wants you to serve together? Are there any other connect groups or people needing help? Are there individuals in church who need to be served? Are there ministries that need people to serve?

SACRIFICING

WATCH

Either have your group watch our fourth video before joining together or start by watching video 4.

READ

Mark 10:32–45 | Mark 14:3–9

UNDERSTAND

In Jewish thought the right hand of the king was the place of greatest prominence; and the left hand, second in prominence (1 Kgs 2:19; Ps 110:1). James and John apparently expected Jesus to establish his kingdom and enter his glory when he reached Jerusalem. They wanted a prominent place in the messianic, earthly kingdom. Though they recognised Jesus as the Messiah, they completely misunderstood the nature of the kingdom Jesus came to establish. (Similar to Peter) Though Mark's readers/hearers had recognised Jesus as a suffering Messiah, some of them probably misunderstood the implications for their discipleship and needed to be corrected.

Despite the audacity of James and John, Jesus does not rebuke them directly but indicated they did not realise the implications of their request. **In the kingdom the way to glory is sacrifice, service, and suffering.** In the kingdom exaltation involves lowliness.

Jesus asks the question to see if they think they can “drink the cup” or be “baptised” as He is baptised. The references to cup and baptism refer to Jesus' death. The cup was figurative use of the phrase to denote someone's portion in life, their hard or easy lot. (Is. 51:17, Jer. 49:12, Ps. 16:5, 23:5).

Jesus intends to ask them if they are able, if they have the necessary fortitude and proper appreciation of values, to share the sacrifices of his position. It is almost as if Jesus is saying *“Can you be immersed in that which has overwhelmed me?”* They have only looked at the glory of the coming kingdom but Jesus directs their attention to the sacrifices that must be made to establish that kingdom.

Jesus assures James and John that they will indeed share in his sufferings. But for those who will sit at his right or left that is another matter entirely. This is a question of greatness once again. We could read Jesus' words as though he is passing responsibility – as if it meant simply that the bestowment did not belong to Him, but to another (potentially God the Father). But Mark makes no mention of the Father. Jesus is saying that it is not up to Him to decide whether they want to achieve greatness – it is up to them.

It is also up to us – Jesus invites us into this way of life to imitate Him, but He cannot decide this for us. If we too want to sit at his right and his left, then he outlines the three key elements of imitating his life:

To unashamedly suffer

To lovingly serve

To willingly sacrifice

UNDERSTAND

It is only right to finish this series reading the story of the unnamed woman in Mark's gospel. An example to us all of what it truly means to empty ourselves of material possession and prioritise Jesus with our lives. As a result of her adoration of Him, she unashamedly suffers because she looks foolish in the eyes of those blinded, she lovingly serves because she knows this is the only way and she willingly sacrifices because she knows what she has in Him is immeasurably more than the cost of her pure nard. She is an example to us all of what it looks like to live a life imitating Jesus.

SHARE

Can you think of a time where you had to work hard and sacrifice to achieve something? What was it?

Have you ever thought of sacrificing to help establish the Kingdom of God in your home, work or travel? What do you understand this to mean?

Can you share a time where you sacrificed something for the greater reward of following Jesus?

When you hear the story of the woman who covered Jesus with expensive pure nard, in a moment of truth who do you relate most with? Those who criticised her for wasting this or the woman herself.

Sacrifice can become either legalistic or artificial, how can sacrificial living be genuine and formational for us unto Jesus?

PRAY

What does the Lord want us to keep from this series together?

What has he revealed to you throughout this series that you can continue to walk in?