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Following the Christ / Repentance / Mark 1:1–8
Series Number: 1
Readings:
Malachi 3:1-6
Mark 1:1-8
Acts 19:1-7

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV®
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Introduction

Introduction Proper

I don’t know about you, but I’m getting kinda sick of fakeness. AI slop bugs me. People’s linkedin profiles bother me. Clickbait annoys me.

We all learn how to fake it til you make it from young age, don’t we? Everyone puts up a facade of competence, and everyone struggles with imposter syndrome too!

What does it mean to be truly *authentic*?

In particular, what does it look like for *Christians* to be truly authentic?

When we look throughout history, we see the church hasn’t always lived up to its own teaching. Much of the German church supported the Nazis during World War II. Much of the church in the American South justified chattel slavery. And the head of the Russian Orthodox church supports the war on their Ukrainian brothers and sisters (World Russian People’s Council 2024).

Why does this kind of thing happen?

Well, its not too hard to attend a church service - you just come in and sit in a pew. Its also not hard to call yourself a Christian, especially if you grew up in a Christian family.

But we can easily miss an essential part of being an *authentic* Christian: Repentance. Turning away from evil, and sincerely following God. That’s not so easy. Its a deep, heart change.

If we miss this, we can end up *using* Christianity to support the evils of our culture, rather than changing culture with the life-giving truth about Jesus. But why should we expect that God enjoys fakeness any more than we do? Do we think he'll accept our insincere religion?

So here's what I want to get across today: The king is coming, so we need to prepare our hearts. An insincere heart brings judgment, but a repentant heart receives forgiveness. An insincere heart brings judgment, but a repentant heart receives forgiveness.

Mark Series

This morning we're starting a new sermon series on the Gospel of Mark, isn't that exciting? Its called, "Following the Christ".

Now Mark is the second book in the New Testament, but it wasn't *written* second. It wasn't written first, either. Actually it was written probably sometime between 55 AD and 69 AD, 25-40 years after Jesus' crucifixion (Black 2023, 5; Garland 2015, 81-82).

But why is it called Mark? Well, it was written by an early Christian evangelist, John Mark . Mark wasn't one of Jesus' specially chosen Twelve apostles, but relied on eyewitness testimony from Jesus' disciple Peter (Black 2023, 3-5; Garland 2015, 47-67).

Now as we go through this series, you'll see that Mark keeps coming back to two questions in particular: 1)Who is Jesus? and 2) what does it mean to follow Jesus?

That's why we've called the series "Following the Christ" - its about Christ, *and* its about what it means for us to follow Jesus in our time, in our city, in our circumstances.

And we're going to see today that sincerity is a crucial part of following Jesus. An insincere heart brings judgment, but a repentant heart receives forgiveness. So how do we become sincere in our faith?

Well, we need to do three things.

Listen to the messenger

State the Point

The first thing is to listen to the messenger. We need to listen to the king's messenger.

Show from the Bible/Explain

Who is the king's messenger?

Well, in today's passage in Mark 1, Mark quotes a couple of places from the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament. The first part Mark quotes is Malachi 3, which we read just before.

In Malachi 3, God speaks through the prophet Malachi. And God says he is going to come to his temple in Israel! The *problem* is, the people aren't in a good state. Malachi's prophesy has exposed their insincerity, their laziness, and their hypocrisy. They claim to worship God, but they give him dodgy offerings, they don't follow God's law, and they just pay him lip service.

So God says I'm coming, and I'm going to purify my temple. And its not going to be pretty for you guys.

But look at Malachi 3:1. He says, "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me." And that's the bit Mark quotes when he writes hundreds of years later!

But then Mark *also* quotes another prophet, Isaiah, chapter 40. I'll read it for you, starting at v3:

Isaiah 40:3–5 NIV
3 A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the
desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made
low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. 5 And the glory of the
LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has
spoken."

Now we skip to v9:

Isaiah 40:9–11 NIV
9 You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to
Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!" 10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty
arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock
like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently
leads those that have young.

So Isaiah *also* prophesies that God is going to come and visit his people. And just like Malachi, Isaiah prophesies that a messenger will arrive first to prepare the way for him.

And Mark quotes both of these passages. He's really driving home the point, isn't he? Why?

Illustrate

> Well, if a king was going to visit a city, he wouldn't just turn up unexpectedly. That would be embarrassing, wouldn't it? Like imagine if king Henry the 8th went to visit Liverpool

> unannounced. There would be no welcoming party, people would be wearing their everyday working clothes, there would be mess everywhere. The people would be embarrassed having the king see them dirty and unprepared. But it would also embarrass the king, because he wouldn't receive the honour fitting for a king, right?
>
> And so they would send messengers ahead to announce, "the king is coming! Clean everything up! Get in your best clothes! Get ready to welcome him!" And they would be wise to listen to the messenger, right?

Well its the same when God arrives. Will he receive a king's welcome? Will the people be ready when he comes?

Well, that's why John the Baptist came. You can see in Mark 1 v4 that Mark mentions John the Baptist straight after he quotes these prophecies. God is coming, and John is the messenger who prepares the people for his arrival.

Apply

And so the question for us today is this: What would you do if God arrived here today in glory, surrounded by his holy angels? Would you be ready? Would you expect him to be pleased with you?

If not, know this - he cares about you being ready. So he's sent you messengers to help you prepare! Your pastors are here to warn you of his coming, to help you be ready. Our job is to prepare God's people for that day.

So I beg you, please hear us. Our heart's desire is for you to be confident and unashamed when he returns!

Repent of our sins

State the Point

The second part of becoming sincere Christians is to repent of our sins. We must repent of our sins.

Show from the Bible/Explain

Like we just saw, John the Baptist came to prepare God's people for God's arrival. How did he prepare them?

In Mark chapter 1 v2-3, Mark says the messenger will “prepare the way” for Jesus, and “make straight paths for him”. Sounds like he’s gonna start up a transport infrastructure project, doesn’t it?

But look at what he does in v4: He goes out of the main cities, he hikes east to the Jordan river, and he preaches a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And he’s quite a wild character isn’t he? He’s wearing camel’s hair, he’s got his leather belt, and he eats locusts and wild honey. I’ve heard of people doing the Daniel diet, the carnivore diet, and all sorts of other weird diets, but not the John diet!

But he’s not trying to be a Jewish Bear Grylls. He’s actually resembling another ancient Israelite prophet, Elijah. 2 Kings 1:8 says Elijah wore “…a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” Elijah’s job was to call Israel to repent of their sins and start sincerely worshipping God (France 2002, 69ff). Fast forward a few hundred years later to Malachi’s day, and in Malachi 4:5 God says through Malachi, “Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Elijah’s going to come back as this messenger figure!

So John the Baptist is doing just what Elijah did - he’s preparing God’s people for his coming. But he’s not building roads - He’s preparing their *hearts* by warning them that God will judge them for their sin if they don’t repent!

And how do the people respond?

They all stream out of the cities, out into the desert. They confess their sins. They get baptised by John. They *repent*.

You see many of the Jews in Israel at that time assumed that if they were born as a Jew, if they were circumcised (for the men only), and if they didn’t break any *major* commands in God’s law, then God would accept them. They’re automatically in God’s good books if they don’t stuff up *too* bad.

But when John started preaching, they realised its not like that! Their relationship with God was not in a healthy place. And if he arrived right at that moment, they’d be in big trouble!

John was calling them to be baptised. Why? Well, if a non-Jew wanted to convert to being a Jew and worshipping the Jewish God, they would be circumcised if they were a male, they would be washed, or baptised, and then they would make a sacrifice. So this baptism, or washing, was part of the process for converting a non-Jew to a Jew. It symbolised cleansing and repentance.

So these Jews are leaving the temple and the religious establishment in Jerusalem, they’re going out into the desert, and they’re being baptised. They’re admitting, “we might be ethnically Jews, but we haven’t been *living* like Jews, like God’s people. We’ve been breaking God’s law.

We are unclean.” And they go through this baptism to become *true* Jews (France 2002, 66; Schnabel 2017, 40-41).

Over a thousand years beforehand, their ancestors first entered Israel through the Jordan river, and now these people re-enter Israel as *true* Jews, Jews in heart, not just ethnicity.

They are no longer relying on their heritage, their circumcision as a baby, or their attendance at the temple - they know they need to confess and repent of their sin, and *live* as God’s law requires. They’re now sincere.

Illustrate

> Ever since my childhood, I’ve loved aircraft. I always wanted to fly planes and helicopters. But three things got in the way of my lofty goal:
>
> The first is that whenever I would fly on a plane, I would get awfully motion sick. I remember one time at Kuala Lumpur airport as a young child - I felt so sick I couldn’t get up off the floor for a good couple hours.
>
> The second obstacle was my mother’s terror. If I’d become a pilot I would never have heard the end of it. She wouldn’t have slept through another night again!
>
> But the third obstacle was that I wasn’t a pilot! It doesn’t matter how many plane flights I took, how many airports I visited, or whether I got one of those fancy pilot hats - I still wasn’t a pilot. To be a pilot, I would have to change my mind about being a pastor, go get training, rack up enough flight hours, and face my mother’s fury - I’d have to commit to changing how I live, right?

Apply

Its the same with Christianity. God will not accept us unless we confess our sins to him, repent, and commit to obeying him. Repentance means to change our mind about sin, to do a 180 degree turn, to commit to following God’s way, not our own way.

Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian. Being raised in a Christian family will not save you from God’s judgment. Being baptised as a baby does not earn God’s acceptance.

An insincere heart only brings judgment. To be accepted by God, we must confess our sins and repent!

Rejoice when he comes

State the Point

The third thing we need to do is to rejoice when the Messiah comes. We rejoice at the coming of the Messiah.

Show from the Bible/Explain

In Mark 1 vv7-8, we see that John's preaching wasn't all doom and gloom and judgment. Actually we see John is quite excited about the coming of Jesus!

And this makes sense when we look back at v1. Mark says this section is the "beginning of the good news about Jesus". Jesus' coming is good news, not bad news!

Not only that, but Jesus is the "Messiah", or "Christ". That's a royal term here; it announces Jesus as the royal heir God promised long ago to Jesus' ancestor, king David (Garland 2015, 241-243).

Not only that, but Jesus is the Son of God! Remember how Malachi and Isaiah prophesied about a messenger who would prepare the way for God? In v4, Mark showed us that John the Baptist is the messenger, right? That means the one he prepares for must be a divine figure, somehow God himself!

But in vv7-8, he announces the coming of *Jesus*.

And get this. John is a great prophet in Israel. But he says Jesus is even "more powerful". In fact, John says he's not even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals, right? That was a slave's job in those days, so John is saying he's not even worthy of being Jesus' *slave!*

But there's something else, too. John is baptising with water. But Jesus will baptise people with the Holy Spirit!

John can immerse people in the Jordan River, but he cannot direct God's Spirit (on "immerse", see France 2002; Montanari 2015; Schnabel 2017, 40; Silva 2014; see Mark 1:9-10). But Jesus can.

In the Old Testament, the prophets looked forward to a day when God would pour out his Spirit on everyone (Joel 2:28-32). Not just kings, not just prophets - everyone! And this would mark the day when God would miraculously save his people.

So John is saying "that day is now here". He's arrived. The Saviour, the one who pours out Spirit, has come! And he's going to save his people (France 2002, 55).

That's why John can preach repentance *for the forgiveness of sins* - because the Messiah, this Jesus, the divine Son of God himself, has come to forgive sinners. This is truly good news!

Apply

You see, a sincere faith doesn't deny that we deserve judgment, or that we need to repent. Rather, a sincere faith rejoices at the coming of the Messiah, because it longs for God's forgiveness!

See often we justify the evil things we do, we make out they're not that bad. Sometimes its because we want to keep doing them, so we water them down to feel better about ourselves.

But sometimes its because we don't feel we *can* be forgiven. We're wracked with guilt. We carry the burden of our sin every day.

Well I have good news for you - The Messiah, the Christ, the Saviour has come. And he offers true forgiveness. It doesn't matter how bad your sin is, Jesus is so power that he can forgive all of it! He is the one with the power to pour out God's Spirit, he is the Son of God himself!

If we refuse to repent, he will return to earth in judgment. But if we repent, he forgives us, and opens his arms to us in warm welcome.

Conclusion

The question is, *how* can Jesus forgive us?

Well, know that this immensely powerful figure, the Messiah, the heir to Israel's throne, the Son of God, the dispenser of the Spirit of God - he was sincere about loving *us*. So sincere, in fact, that he was willing to change everything for us.

Enthroned in heaven with his father, he had worship, honour, and glory fit for a deity. But he chose to take on a human nature and visit us.

He entered our poverty, our sickness, our humility, our mess.

He became human so he could *die*. He wanted to pay the price of justice for our evil deeds.

Yes, he changed everything for us! The immortal God took on mortality! The author of life experienced an agonising death! The king of the universe came as a servant! The purest of pure divine beings took on the shame and punishment of sin.

Yes, he was sincere about loving us. He changed everything for us. Won't we change our minds about sin, and repent? Will we sincerely love him in return?

It is only through confession, repentance, and sincere faith that God's church will be what he made us to be. Otherwise, we'll end up no different to the world around us: fake and inauthentic, and participating in the evils of our day, repeating the mistakes of the centuries past. Church, let's be sincere.

A sincere faith listens to God's messengers. It repents from sin. And it rejoices at the good news that Jesus came in love and mercy to forgive us. THAT is a heart fit for the coming king. May we all be ready when he returns.

› After 8:30: Nicene Creed

› After 10:30: Behold Him -> Confession & Assurance -> Apostles Creed

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