

# Mark 6:1-13

Intro A Scandalous Gospel February 10, 2008

Jesus' ministry began with a flourish of activity. Mark's gospel describes the calling of the disciples, the casting out of demons, healing the sick and forgiving sins in episodic fashion. Jesus' teaching drew large crowds and his words calmed raging storms...and then it was time to come home to Nazareth. What happened there reads like a failure, but as we make our way through Mark, on a journey to the cross, we soon realize that Jesus' rejection at home reminds us that the good news we proclaim is a scandal to all who hear. READ Mark 6:1-13

One can only imagine the headlines: *Local Boy Comes Home To Lead Us To Heaven*. The young man came from good stock, well respected in the community. He was away to be educated as the spiritual leader God would have him to be. He was to follow in his father's footsteps, but for young Jonathan Edwards, his service as pastor in Northampton under the tutelage of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, meant that he would always be in the shadows of his own family, serving those who knew him when. No one held more power, spiritually or politically in the Connecticut River valley than Stoddard.

Much changed on February 11, 1729 when his grandfather and Northampton's Congregational Church's senior pastor died, leaving to his grandson the difficult task of ministerial charge of one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in the colony, and one proud of its morality, its culture and its reputation. But despite how we might imagine the story to turn out, for 21 years Jonathan Edwards grew in stature not only in that prestigious church, but also throughout colonial New England. His story appears to contrast with that which we just read.

He lead that congregation through the tumultuous revival known as the Great Awakening, in which people shook off the shackles of an acculturated Christianity which no longer put any demands for personal faith in one's relationship with Christ. He took them through the aftermath of slow growth and a season in which few professed faith. He spoke to them not as some would want us to believe, that they were only sinners in the hands of an angry God, but much more often he spoke using his favorite phrase "the sweet grace of our Lord Jesus."

On May 3, 1750 after a series of confused and acrimonious church meetings, it was finally agreed to call a council of ministers to recommend for or against Jonathan Edwards' dismissal.

Edwards was charged with meddling with controversy in the pulpit. After three days of examination, the council voted to recommend, "that this relation be immediately dissolved." The Northampton congregation ratified the decision by a resounding 230 to 23.

Edwards' dismissal from the church in Northampton was a troublesome time for the now large family. After lean months of unemployment, Edwards found an unlikely assignment. He and his family moved to the remote town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then on the edge of the forested frontier.

For a man who has been called the greatest American philosopher, his new congregation was a challenge. His congregants were the Housatonic Indians who gathered to hear the Word of God, not with Puritan refinement, but attended worship wearing bear grease to fend off insects.

They say you can never go home. Jesus' words as a hometown boy were not well received and his response is now a stock phrase: "a prophet is not without honor except in his home town."

But this passage is more than just that familiarity breeds contempt, but the scandal of the gospel. When the gospel comes, it often hits us between the eyes, so that we react with a vehemence that reveals our fallen condition. The key to our passage is in v3, that they took offense at him, using the word *scandalon*, from which we get our word scandal. There is outrage and disgrace when we come face to face with the gospel, it drives people away.

Jesus offends people. He always has and for that very reason, we will, at time, do the same. But the offense is crucial to understand. As Jesus returns to Nazareth and turns out his disciples to preach, we see the scandal of the gospel in two important concepts. The gospel offends because it is so ordinary and because it calls us to dependence.

## THE GOSPEL IS SCANDALOUS BECAUSE IT IS ORDINARY

When Jesus returns to Nazareth, he does so on the heels of repeated success. All is going well. So when the Sabbath came, it would not be unthinkable for this celebrated teacher to read from the Torah and comment on God's Word. The congregation was astonished, a reaction reported before. In 1:22 those in the Capernaum synagogue were likewise astonished. When the paralytic who was lowered through the roof rose up and walked, the people were amazed (2:12). So when he spoke at his home synagogue, the same response should not surprise us.

But the three questions they asked reveal how they struggled with what they experienced.

*Where did he get these things* – his insight is spectacular, his words erudite

*What is the wisdom given to him* – no local boy has ever been so profound

*How are such mighty works done by his hands* – this power has never been experienced.

What follows explains how they were offended by what happened. Their amazement turns sour.

*He's a carpenter, a tekton*, a skilled laborer who may have built some of their homes, furniture, and tools. This may or may not have been a put down. He is not a scholar who should lecture us. Who does he think he is, his behavior does not fit his station in life.

*He's the son of Mary...* a phrase that may just mean, *we know his kin*, or it may be a deep cut. It is rare in a patrilineal society, in a traditional culture in which one's identity comes through the father, that the mother's name would be used. We see this at the end, after his brothers are listed; the sisters are nameless. Some suggest this is because Joseph is now dead or that the crowd better knows Mary. But it may be more insidious.

In a small town, everyone knows everyone else's life story. They all knew Mary was pregnant before she became Joseph's wife. Maybe such a scandal happens to...to a carpenter...but not a rabbi.

*We know his brothers...* brothers contra to Roman teaching that claims they're Joseph's kids from a prior marriage in order to falsely protect Mary's perpetual virginity. There were siblings, at least four brothers and a couple of sisters. James went on to become the head of the church in Jerusalem and Judas is most likely Jude whose brief letter comes just before Revelation.

All this just goes to make the point clear; Jesus is offensive, because Jesus is too ordinary.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus and the good news he proclaims subverts the normal way we think salvation ought to be.

All other religions say salvation is an escape from ordinary humanness. Salvation transcends the dirt and grim of everyday life. To think of God eating and drinking, making a nice set of table and chairs just won't fit. Salvation is escape from the ordinary, isn't it?

But the gospel subverts all this because salvation transforms ordinary life. God comes to humanity as a man, vulnerable to pain, living a life like ours, so that he can redeem our lives. What we offer is not an ethereal, metaphysical, transcendent spirituality that helps us escape the pain and suffering of this fallen world. Rather the gospel empowers us to live out our faith in the context of sin and misery. The transformation we seek comes as God enters into the ordinary aspects of our lives and redeems us from the inside out.

How does this apply to us today...

The complaint people have with grace is that we often see little difference in lives, people are marginally cleaned up, major sins set aside, but the daily grind reminds.

If I'm spiritual, why must I still clean toilets?

If I'm transformed, why do I still need my heart cleansed?

It is also on the positive side; as well...must I now, as a Christian, justify my life as a means to win souls for Jesus? Is it wrong to just enjoy a hearty meal with friends, or do I make our time holy by spending time in prayer. Is it wrong to enjoy the ordinary life of a human or do I need to spiritualize it, sanctify it, and be less ordinary?

The gospel subverts our thinking in another way that, offends the inquirer. If the ordinary is God's realm of operation then grace comes not with flash and show, but in the most common, unassuming of ways.

2 Kings 5 illustrates the scandal of the ordinary grace of God. Namaan was a commander of the Syrian army. He had everything going in his favor: a conqueror of his enemies and a man of valor. But he had a major problem...leprosy. No cure could be found, but he heard of a prophet in Israel who could help him, Elisha. Namaan treks to Samaria laden with gold and silver, ready to do whatever it took to get better. He bore a letter from the king of Syria, testifying to the importance of this man. He was no ordinary inquirer. He needed a miracle and was willing to get it at any cost.

When word came to Elisha, he sent his servant out to tell Namaan what to do. Elisha wanted no payment, cared little about his letter of reference from the king, was unimpressed with the entourage that followed. His instructions were simple: go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored.

Namaan was infuriated. Read 5:11-14. He wanted a salvation that fits his ego, grace that puts demands on him so that he could show his sincerity, he wanted what we all want, to do enough that we have leverage with God. We want a miracle with flash and show. This is all too ordinary.

This lowly image of a carpenter opening up the mysteries of the universe is not what we want. God is lofty and spiritual, not a gritty country hick. The greatest obstacle to faith is not a failure for God to act, but the unwillingness of the human heart to believe that God acts in common ways.

It is not until we realize that the grace of God comes to us in all very ordinary, earthly ways, with flesh and blood, by ordinary people whom most would never notice, until we see the scandal of a salvation coming in Jesus, we will never see the life changing power of the cross.

Have you felt the offense of the cross in your own life? Have you wrestled with the truth that for your life to change it is going to be God working through flesh and blood, ink and paper, water, bread and wine?

For educated, degreed, credentialed, successful people – the gospel subverts our inflated sense of self-importance. These truths are too pedestrian, too everyday, nothing more than simple stories for simple minds. I want sermons that present hard truths so that I can convince myself of my intellectual prowess. I want a church where there are supernatural acts so that I can prove my spirituality. I want applications that send me from this place with a list of what to do so that by the end of the week my accomplished task list validates my salvation.

But God does not feed our ego and we are scandalized, offended. It was true of Nazareth 2000 years ago, Northampton 275 years ago and in Cornerstone today.

Faced with rank unbelief Jesus could do no mighty work there.

It is not as though Jesus' power is restrained by unbelief, that he tried hard to be the Son of God, but human sin restrained Him to a few healings of sick people. Faith is not the key that turns God's power on...we don't have that kind of control.

Rather, he could not, would not, do miracles, for to reward such unbelief would only confirm their self-righteousness. The scandal of an ordinary gospel means the extraordinary grace of God's work is likewise lost. It is an ordinary gospel that heals the sick and casts our demons.

What happens next drives home the ordinariness of the gospel to our lives. Jesus *failed* big time. So what does He do? He sends out 12 newbies two by two with authority over unclean spirits. This has *recipe for failure* written all over it. Jesus makes it even more frightening, as he gives them their marching orders. All this is because...

## **THE GOSPEL IS SCANDALOUS BECAUSE IT CALLS FOR DEPENDENCE**

Jesus sends them out without sufficient supplies, only a staff, sandals and one tunic. No food, money ...nothing. While some say Jesus is merely mimicking the cynic philosophers of the day, their dress has a purpose that should not escape us.

They are like the Israelites as they prepared to leave Egypt after Passover (Exodus 12). They are a walking illustration of God rescuing his people from slavery. Like the children of Israel fleeing bondage, finding their protection with the blood on the doorposts as the Angel of Death passes over the homes, they live dependent upon God's grace to protect them

As they go, they are going to have to rely on the kindness of others, for food and lodging.

They can't set up camp outside the town, but have to find a friendly home and not move around in search of better quarters. If they are not well received (and we have good reason to believe that would be the case), they are to shake the dust off their feet, something that observant Jews did as they left Gentile lands and re-entered Israel. The response to rejection is a silent testimony of God withholding his grace.

Notice what it is they to do...proclaim that people should repent. Do you think this could contribute to their poor reception? While they are called to depend on God by depending on others, they are to present truths that will offend. Yet through all that they are to depend on God to take them through a perilous situation. All of this ratchets up the scandal index a notch.

Not only are they, ordinary men, preaching an ordinary message (that is, a message of grace that takes us out of the equation), a message that calls them sinners to repent... they are forbidden to simply protect themselves from the abuses of their audience. Here we see lived out the gospel we are called to believe – dependence on God alone for our salvation

The gospel calls us to express our dependence on God by turning away from autonomy, repenting of self-reliance and accept an ordinary solution of grace alone as the only answer to our deepest need. That is lived out as we go out. It is applied to our lives as we speak to others, that the gospel that calls us to cease depending on ourselves, calls us to depend on others in the most vulnerable way.

This is not prescriptive, that you all have to get rid of your second tunic, (shirt?). Luke 9 is a parallel passage in Luke 9, but then in Luke 10 Jesus sends out the 70 and changes the rules. At the core is the offensive nature of having to depend so totally.

So often we protect ourselves, insulate our hearts from the pain of a scandalous gospel simply by keeping our mouths shut. We do not open up our lives to rejection by never relying on God to be our only source, our contentment, and our joy. The issue is not just being bold.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, in *Religious Affections*:

There is a false boldness for Christ that only comes from pride. A man may rashly expose himself to the world's dislike and even deliberately provoke its displeasure, and yet do so out of pride. ... True boldness for Christ transcends all; it is indifferent to the displeasure of either friends or foes. Boldness enables Christians to forsake all rather than Christ, and to prefer to offend all rather than to offend Him.

It was this boldness that lead Jonathan Edwards to challenge his own people with the an ordinary grace of Jesus that calls us to live extraordinary lives.

As new converts filled the church during the great revivals of the 1740's, Edwards noted that the lives of the newly revived did not match their profession of faith. Edwards did the unthinkable, as he required applicants for church membership undergo screening and make "a solemn public renewal of their covenant with God."

While that may not bother most of you, it was a slap in the face of his grandfather; Solomon Stoddard prided themselves as being above such inquiry. People refused to become members of his church. Four years went by and not one person applied. During this time Edwards challenged some young men who were engaging in immoral behavior and they turned on him. The prophet lost honor

But who among us are so bold, so dependent that we ourselves do not at one time or another find that we are offended, scandalized, put off by the gospel we say we believe.

This word *skandalon*, offense carries another meaning that Mark uses, to fall away. Just like the people of Nazareth fell away, rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, so also Jesus told those 12 men who followed him that they too would be scandalized, offended. They would fall away. In 14:27 Jesus tells them what will.

But here we are reminded of the ordinary grace, the sweet grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus, facing death for his disciples promises simple that after he is raised, he will go before them in Galilee. If you are Christ's and you are scandalized by the gospel, if the ordinariness drives you to madness, if the call to be dependent on Christ is too hard to follow, remember...it is not about you who follows, it is not about the power of your ability to believe.

It is solely about Jesus Christ, who will hold you close and not let you go.

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas borrowed from a sermon by Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, The Offense of Jesus (#433A), 4/23/06.