

7.14

The Disciples of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark develops two themes regarding the disciples of Jesus:

1. Jesus's disciples are faithless to him.
2. Jesus is faithful to his disciples.

Theme One: The Disciples' Faithlessness to Jesus

The disciples' faithlessness is developed progressively in three stages:

First, the Disciples Are Unperceptive

The disciples do not grasp who Jesus is. They hear his word and witness his mighty acts, but they do not realize that he is the authoritative agent of God, nor do they understand much of what he says to them. This is illustrated in three successive boat scenes:

After Jesus stills a storm at sea, he asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They huddle with fear, asking each other, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (4:35–41).

After feeding the five thousand, Jesus comes to his disciples, walking on the water, and he stills another storm. Mark says that "they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:45–52).

When the disciples worry about not having enough bread, Jesus reminds them of the miraculous feedings that he has performed and asks, “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (8:14–21).

Second, the Disciples Misunderstand

At about the midpoint of this Gospel, the disciples come to a better understanding of who Jesus is, but they draw all the wrong conclusions from this. They realize that he is the authoritative agent of God, but they think that this means glory and honor for him (and for themselves). The best examples are their reactions to his three passion predictions:

After Jesus predicts his passion the first time, Peter (who now realizes that Jesus is the Christ [see 8:29]) rebukes him, prompting Jesus to say, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (8:31–33).

When Jesus predicts his passion a second time, the disciples remain completely oblivious to what he has said and go on to discuss which of them is the greatest. Jesus responds by saying, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:33–35).

Immediately after Jesus predicts his passion a third time, two of his disciples ask him if they can be guaranteed seats at his right and his left in his glory (10:35–41).

Third, the Disciples Reject Jesus

When the disciples do come to understand the nature of Jesus's mission, they betray, deny, and forsake him.

One of the disciples, Judas, betrays Jesus, just as Jesus predicted (14:10–11, 17–21, 44–45).

Another disciple, Peter, denies Jesus, just as Jesus predicted (14:29–31, 66–72).

All the other disciples forsake Jesus, just as he predicted (14:26–28, 50).

The faithlessness of Jesus's disciples in Mark's passion narrative is the final stage of what has been developing all along. In some sense, the disciples appear to get worse, not better, as the story progresses. Significantly, this faithlessness is reported without redress. Mark does not report the remorse of Judas (Matt. 27:3–10), the recovery of Peter (John 21:15–19), or the postresurrection reconciliation of Jesus with his disciples (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:36–53; John 20:19–21:14).¹

Theme Two: Jesus's Faithfulness to His Disciples

Jesus's faithfulness to his disciples is demonstrated throughout the Gospel of Mark in five ways.

Jesus Calls the Disciples (1:16–20; 2:13–14; 3:13–14)

There are no “volunteer disciples” in Mark's Gospel. People become disciples at Jesus's initiative, as a result of his call.

Jesus Gathers the Disciples into a “Family” (3:34–35)

Jesus describes his disciples (and all who do the will of God) as his brothers and sisters and mother. The identity of the disciples as a group and their relationship to one another is based solely on their relationship to Jesus.

Jesus Teaches the Disciples, Enlightening Them with Privileged Knowledge (4:33–34)

Jesus teaches his disciples about the mystery of the kingdom (4:11) and sometimes provides them with private explanations of his sayings (4:10–20; 7:17–23). Significantly, he responds to their misconceptions that follow each of his passion predictions with teachings on the true meaning of discipleship (8:34–38; 9:35–37; 10:42–45).

Jesus Empowers the Disciples for Mission (3:14–15; 6:7–13)

Jesus provides his disciples with the authority that they need to preach, to heal, and to overcome Satan by casting out demons.

Jesus Keeps His Disciples in Spite of Their Faithlessness (14:26–27; 16:7)

Jesus tells his disciples that even though they will forsake him, he will want them to rejoin him after his resurrection. Significantly, Mark

does not say whether the disciples accept this invitation. As the story closes, the fate of the disciples is unknown.

The Intended Effect on Mark's Reader

Mark seems to assume that his readers will identify with the disciples (see, e.g., 13:14, where he assumes that readers will hear words spoken to the disciples as being spoken to them). Thus the unresolved issue that confronts the disciples at the end of Mark's Gospel thrusts itself beyond the world of the story into the world of Mark's readers. Those readers, like the disciples, must weigh their own faithlessness to Jesus against his faithfulness to them and evaluate their relationship with him accordingly.

1. On the disciples' progressive faithlessness, see Theodore Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).