

I. INTRODUCTION

Happy New Year, church family! I hope that your transition into 2026 has been marked by God's blessing and presence. A new year is often a time of celebration, of resolutions, of new hope, and new experiences. [*Story of son Titus and Settlers 2, game related to Ancient Rome*]

Octavius was the given name of Caesar Augustus, who was Rome's first emperor and was celebrated as one who brought a new era of hope, prosperity and power to the Roman Empire. He was hailed as the "son of god," and his birthday was deemed as "gospel," signaling "the beginning of the Good News for the world." An Egyptian inscription called Augustus a star "shining with the brilliance of the Great Heavenly Savior." All of this is highly ironic since he reigned during the birth and early life of Christ.

Of course, no one today still thinks Caesar Augustus is a savior. But, more and more people think it is possible to worship the Caesar of today (whatever or whoever that might be) and Christ both as savior. You see, even though it may not make sense or be outright contradictory, they simultaneously hail Caesar and hail King Jesus at the same time. They think they can have their cake and eat it too, claiming it's eminently possible to love God *and* love Caesar (or the world) even though that is incoherent.

And it's "possible" because we live in an age of bespoke spirituality, where a person packages his beliefs as part of his quest for self-fulfillment or cobbles together his own customized belief system. This phenomenon is called **metamodernism**. Most of you have heard of postmodernism. Metamodernism reacts to that and began to surface around 2010. This post-post-modernism promotes the idea that "we may select various truths according to our subjective experiences, but that those selected truths are objectively true."¹ So what is true then is what I choose based on my subjective feelings. Mood and vibe matter more than logic in the watery world of metamodernism. It is all about what you want to take or leave, follow or unfollow, like or dislike, swipe left or swipe right.

Fueled by our dizzying and non-stop digital life, we're cross-pressured by dozens of options and viewpoints that destabilize our beliefs.² So, the response of metamodernism to all this is to assume reality is ours to curate and filter as we see fit. So, again according to the metamodernist, one can worship Caesar and God, even though that is internally inconsistent and ultimately impossible. Even Christians are affected by this phenomenon as they pick and choose what parts of the Bible they think are true, or select aspects of Christian traditions that best suit them. They cobble together their own customized system of the Christian faith.

Thankfully, Mark offers a cogent, refreshing, powerful wake-up call and response to metamodernism and its "Choose Your Own Adventure" framework. That **response is the gospel, embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ**. Mark presents Jesus Christ as the person in whom truth, love, grace, power and perfection are all unified. Christ grounds us in a purposeful identity that has as its end the glory of God and true hope for fellow neighbor. I am privileged

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/swimming-in-a-sanctimonious-sea-of-subjectivity-a-proposal-for-christian-authenticity-in-a-made-up-world/>

² As Mark Legg writes: "The chronically online generation must deal with a preposterous amount of raw information and opinions thrust on them. A spiritual seeker on TikTok will come across 20 distinct, articulate spiritual beliefs and another 20 well-presented, aesthetic religious practices in a week. In centuries past, a person might only meet two people in his entire life who had a meaningfully different worldview." <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/engage-bespoke-spirituality/>

to kick us off in a new series on the gospel according to Mark. There's no better way to start the new year than to dig into one of the four accounts of the life of our Lord. Historically, Mark has sadly taken a backseat to the other three gospel accounts, much to the loss of the Church.³ But, what a joy it will be for us to go through Mark in 2026 and to mine the treasures of this gem of a gospel.

In today's text, I want us to consider three basic but essential questions, each building upon the other: (1) What is the gospel? (2) Who is Jesus? and (3) What is your response to Jesus? These questions will help us unpack this tight and dense passage. And as you reflect on them, may they help you **cherish and worship Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering Son of God.**

II. BACKGROUND ON MARK

But before we dive in, and since this is the first message on Mark, I want to give a brief overview of this book.

- a. **Author:** Who was Mark? His name is actually John Mark, and we first see him in Acts 12:12 as the son of Mary, in whose house the early church gathered in Jerusalem. Although Mark was not an apostle and he never identifies himself as the author, he was **Peter's interpreter**, according to Papias and other early Church Fathers. His gospel can be seen as the "memoirs of Peter," capturing what the leader of the apostles preached and taught about Jesus. What a unique, inside glimpse it is then of our Lord's life and ministry!

Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas (who was his cousin (Col 4:10)) on their first missionary journey in Acts 12 and 13. Unfortunately and without explanation, he left the pair at Perga (Acts 13:13), which led to a serious rift between the two leaders (Acts 15:37-41). Due to his desertion, Paul basically fires Mark and refuses to bring him on his second missionary journey, instead taking Silas. Thankfully though, there appears to have been a reconciliation toward the end of Paul's life because in 2 Tim 4:11, he tells Timothy: "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry." The final reference to Mark is in 1 Peter 5:13, where the apostle writes: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son."

- b. **Provenance and Audience:** This reference to "Babylon" is an allusion to Rome, which is very likely where Mark wrote from. His target audience were Christians in Rome who were being persecuted under the notorious Emperor Nero.⁴
- c. **Date:** Nero had instituted a reign of terror, especially in A.D. 64 when he blamed the Great Fire of Rome (where 80% of the city was destroyed) on Christians. This led to gruesome horrors like Christians being burned alive as human torches, being ripped apart by lions, or being crucified. Both Peter and Paul were killed during Nero's persecution. Mark is generally dated to the early to mid 60s, toward the end of Peter's

³ Regrettably, many Church Fathers thought Mark was artless and a clumsy writer. They cited Mark the least of the 4 gospels by far (less than 1/10 of Matthew, which was quoted most).

⁴ Some reasons for supporting Mark's audience as Roman Christians include (1) his sparing use of the Old Testament (unlike Matthew, who wrote for the Jews), (2) presentation of Romans in a neutral (12:17; 15:1-2, 21-22) and sometimes favorable (15:39) light, and (3) use of what scholars call "Latinisms," which are transliterating familiar Latin expressions into Greek. For example in Mark 5:9, Jesus asks the demon-possessed man "What is your name?" And he replies, "My name is Legion (λεγιών = Roman army unit), for we are many."

life or shortly thereafter. Recent scholarship has shown Mark is likely the earliest of the gospels and that Matthew and Luke relied on Mark to write their gospel accounts.⁵

- d. **Style:** Mark moves at a vivid pace and reads like a riveting eyewitness account. He writes in a direct, colloquial and lively way (perhaps reflecting Peter's preaching style?). His quick tempo is marked by often starting sentences with "And" (*kai*), or frequently using words like "immediately" (*euthos*) and "again" (*palin*), and employing the present tense to narrate past events, which helps engage audiences. Mark makes the readers feel like they're right there in the thick of the action.

Mark is also a **master of irony and paradoxes**. He often portrays Jesus as reversing or confounding expectations, challenging conventional stereotypes, whether religious, social, or political. For example, insiders like his disciples and even his own family only understand his identity and mission gradually and with much difficulty (3:21, 31-35; 6:1-6; 8:14-21, 33; 10:35-45), whereas outsiders like blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52) and a Roman centurion (15:39) respond to Jesus more immediately and intuitively.⁶

- e. **Major Themes:** Though Mark comes racing out of the starting gates proclaiming that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, he also makes us pause and wonder just exactly who he is. **Christology is a major theme of Mark.** After Jesus calms the storm in Mark 4:41, the disciples nervously ask, "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Mark invites us to ponder this same question and leads us to think God's thoughts about Jesus.

Aside from Christology, **another major theme is discipleship**. Jesus was not a lone teacher, but a leader of a group of disciples. Sometimes they are positive models with wholehearted commitment to follow Jesus (1:18-29; 2:14; 10:28-30) and sharing in Jesus' work (3:14-15; 6:12-13, 30). But more often, Mark casts them as negative models who exhibit fear and faithlessness (4:40; 6:49-50), selfish ambition (9:34; 10:35-45), hardness of heart (6:52, 8:17), spiritual failure (9:14-29), and desertion (14:50-52).

As we'll see, these two themes are present even in today's passage and form the basis for two of the three questions we're exploring.

III. WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

With that brief but necessary background on Mark, let's dive into this morning's text, which functions as Mark's prologue. **He presents Jesus front and center as the subject of his gospel, its main character.**

Verse 1 reads: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Seems plain and simple enough, but this is the title and thematic statement for all of Mark's gospel. This leads us to our first question: "What is the gospel?"

First, it is *the gospel* of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel, singular. In the Greco-Roman world, "gospel" (like the birthday of Caesar Augustus) was always in the plural, meaning one good tiding among others. But in the New

⁵ For example, there is the argument from order: Whenever Matthew and Luke agree, they always follow the order of Mark. Or there is the argument from content overlap: 90-97% of Mark is in Matthew, and 88% in Luke, but 50% of Matthew is not in Mark (and roughly same for Luke). Why would Mark cut Matthew and Luke in half and then add some minor unique details to his gospel?

⁶ Another example of Jesus challenging stereotypes is how the religious authorities in Jerusalem, like the scribes and Sanhedrin, are often fighting with Jesus, but the lowly Syrophenician Gentile woman is commended for her faith (7:29).

Testament, it is always in the singular, because it is *the* “good news” of God in Jesus Christ. There is **only one gospel and no other** (cf Gal 1:6-9); not 4 gospels, but rather 4 accounts (according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the one and same gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it is the gospel *of Jesus Christ*. The gospel is not just a set of beliefs or actions, but **fundamentally the person of Jesus**, who is the Christ, and the Son of God.⁷ So, instead of asking “What is the gospel?” we should ask “Who is the gospel?” And Mark couldn’t be clearer in his answer that the gospel is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

IV. WHO IS JESUS? (CHRISTOLOGY)

But **who exactly is this Jesus?** This is our second question, and the one we’ll be spending the most time answering. We’ve already seen how Mark right away says he is the “Son of God.”⁸ This is his foundational identity. What does this mean?

Divine Sonship: As the Son, Jesus has sovereign freedom and great authority, supremacy over demons and expert teachers (1:21-28), declaring what is and is not Caesar’s (12:13-17)). Spiritually, as the Son of God, Jesus binds Satan (3:27), presumes to forgive sins (2:10), and replaces the temple in Jerusalem with himself as the place where God meets man (15:38-39).

Divine Suffering: But, the surprising key to understanding Jesus as the Son of God is in his suffering. Jesus must be obedient to the Father, even to death on a cross (14:36; cf Phil 2). Mark often uses the model of the suffering servant in Isaiah (especially Is 53:5, 10) to portray Jesus. This is reflected in the key verse in Mark, chapter 10 verse 45, Jesus says he “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”⁹ Jesus is the authoritative yet suffering Son of God.

Verses 2 through 13 further flesh out what this means. First, look at verses 2 and 3 with me:

*As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”*

- a. **OT prophecy**: Through these two verses, though they talk about John the Baptist, we still see *Jesus as the bringer of God’s salvation, who inaugurates a new exodus*.

⁷ Confirming the importance of this opening designation of Jesus, the only two times in Mark where humans declare the identity of Jesus is midway where Peter confesses him to be “Christ” (8:29), and at the end, when the centurion declares him to be the “Son of God” (15:39).

⁸ At Jesus’ baptism (1:11) and his transfiguration (9:7), the Father calls Jesus, “my Son, whom I love.” Even demons recognize Jesus’ Sonship (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). Yet, Mark also readily portrays the humanness of Christ (e.g., sorrow (14:34), disappointment (8:12), anger (11:15-17), and fatigue (4:38)).

⁹ Even in his structure, Mark carefully crafts his gospel to portray Jesus as having authority yet also suffering. Geographically, Jesus starts off in Galilee, where he is received as a powerful, seemingly unstoppable force. But, as the gospel progresses and Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, he becomes the lowly, unresistant, suffering servant. Finally, in Jerusalem, our Lord is rejected and is killed.

These verses are actually a merging and blending of three passages from Exodus 23, Malachi 3, and Isaiah 40. Those prophecies relate to *God's* presence with Israel after the first exodus, and how *God* will return like a shepherd to gather his people. The “voice of one crying in the wilderness” in verse 3 is not just heralding the Messiah but *of God himself*, who appears in Jesus of Nazareth. So for Mark, Jesus is the beginning of the fulfillment of the God's covenant promises in the Old Testament that he will redeem and be with his people.

Mark is portraying **Christ as a new exodus for God's people**. Jesus will release them from slavery to sin and will lead them to everlasting life with the Father. But he is not just a better Moses who leads the people. Jesus himself *is* this very exodus, the bringer of salvation, through his being the Son of God in the flesh.

- b. **John's preparation:** And the one who declares this new exodus, this “way of the Lord,” is John the Baptist, who suddenly appears in verse 4 (sudden things happen a lot in Mark). John is the “messenger” and the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” preparing the way of Jesus. Through verses 4 to 8 regarding John's preparation, we learn that *Jesus is the mighty one who baptizes with the Spirit*.

Ancient Jews anticipated that Elijah would come before the appearance of God himself, heralding the Day of the Lord. By the way he dresses and being in the wilderness, **John is identifying himself as this returning Elijah**.¹⁰ In 9:13, Jesus says of John that “Elijah has come,” and in Matthew 17:12-13, affirms that he came in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Yet, **Jesus is mightier than this returning Elijah**, as John says in verse 7: “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” Even more striking, unlike his baptism with water, John says in verse 8 that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.¹¹

John took the Levitical practice of cleansing by water, which symbolized the moral and spiritual transformation needed to be in God's presence, as the way to prepare for the arrival of Jesus. Mark calls it a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

But upon actual faith in Jesus, baptism with the Holy Spirit occurs. In Acts 19:2, Paul asks some Ephesian disciples, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” This is the baptism that John prophesies in verse 8. It is the baptism that occurs at conversion, when one believes and confesses Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). Yet, contrary to Pentecostal teaching, there is no subsequent baptism of the Spirit after conversion. John's was pre-Christian and done in anticipation of the coming Messiah.¹² Jesus' baptism occurs when we believe in him and become a Christian.

¹⁰ John is also like Elijah in fearlessly facing down his critics. Elijah confronted King Ahab in 1 Ki 18:18, and John criticizes Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 3:7), and Herod Antipas (Mk 6:18).

¹¹ Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit is a fulfillment of various Old Testament prophecies like Joel 2:28, Isaiah 59:21, and Ezekiel 36:26-27.

¹² When Paul confronted the same Ephesian disciples and found out they were baptized into John's baptism, the apostle said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus” (Acts 19:4). They were then baptized in the name of Christ.

Application: To summarize verses 4 to 8, Mark sets forth John as the humble forerunner of Jesus, who will pour out the Spirit. How can you be more like John and humbly play your limited part in God's larger plan of redemption? John said he had to decrease while Jesus had to increase (Jn 3:30). **How can we decrease so that Jesus can increase?**

One way is to view our lives against the backdrop of God's eternal plans for us and the world. We are both less and more important than we think. Less important because we just play one small part in God's plans. But more important because even that small part has eternal significance. Jesus said John was the greatest human who ever lived, yet even the least in the kingdom of God, who are covered by the righteousness of Christ, was greater than he (Matt 11:11). All of you who trust in Christ are in the kingdom of God.

Pearl Goode: Your prayers matter! Think of little known Pearle Goode, the "little old lady from Pasadena," who prayed in secret for Billy Graham for many years. Graham attributed his success to prayer warriors like Pearle, so much so that at her funeral, Graham's wife said: "Here lie the mortal remains of much of the secret of Bill's ministry."¹³

Unknown shoemaker: Your words matter! Think of the still unknown shoemaker from 1850 who stepped in last minute for a minister who was snowed in. A young man regarded this thin-looking shoemaker as "really stupid," as he kept repeating Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." And even though this young man criticized him for not pronouncing the words rightly, he was saved through the shoemaker's preaching. That young man turned out to be Charles Spurgeon.

Regardless of our limited influence, reach, or resources, we should simply point those whom God has placed in our lives to Christ as John did. So, beloved, imitate John in his humility. Imitate Pearl Goode in her perseverance in prayer. Imitate the shoemaker in his faithfulness to speaking God's word. As I often tell my boys, "Life is not about winning or being first. It is about faithfulness to Christ and being instruments in his hands." May that be true for all of us, especially myself.

- c. **Baptism of Christ:** Moving forward, from verses 9 to 11, we read the account of Jesus' baptism. There we learn that *Jesus is the one who receives the Spirit of God*. He who was to baptize with the Spirit is himself equipped for that role as the Spirit descends on him at his baptism.

This **descent of the Spirit** is an anointing of Jesus' human nature that empowers him for his ministry. It is a fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1, which reads: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."¹⁴

God the Father also speaks directly to Jesus and expresses his perfect pleasure in his Son in verse 11: "And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'" These are echoes

¹³ <https://harvest.org/resources/gregs-blog/post/the-little-old-lady-from-pasadena-who-prayed-for-billy-graham/>

¹⁴ This is the same verse Jesus chose in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4, where he boldly says this Scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing.

back to passages, again in Isaiah, about God delighting in his suffering servant (Is 42:1; 49:3), who is to be a light for the Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth (Is 49:6).¹⁵

Now it's very important to know that Jesus was baptized not because he needed forgiveness of sins, but rather to fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15; cf Rom 3:21-22). **Jesus had no sin**, but his baptism is his association with our sins and his solidarity with us, his people. Jesus shares the circumstances that cause people to become aware of their need for a Savior, and *he meets that need himself as the Savior*. Baptism not only enables Jesus to speak and act for God, but speak and act *as God*. Jesus' baptism confirms his divine Sonship and his servanthood.

- d. **Temptation of Christ:** But without even a moment to catch our breath, Mark forges ahead and we read in verses 12 to 13 that Jesus' Sonship and servanthood will be marked with suffering. He is the *one who battles the powers of evil, but through testing and trials*.

The Spirit remarkably thrusts him out into the wilderness. Like Adam, Jesus is tested and exposed to Satan's schemes. But, Adam had it much easier: he was in lush Eden, belly full, and with Eve and fellowship with God. The Second Adam was in the desolate wilderness, famished after 40 days of fasting (Matt 4:2), and alone with the "wild animals."¹⁶ For 40 days – alluding to the first exodus of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years¹⁷ – Jesus endures and then prevails over his adversary, Satan.¹⁸

Jesus fixes the failures of the first Adam and the first exodus, and will proclaim, as mentioned earlier, a new exodus that is fulfilled in and through his life and ministry. But this **new exodus is a path of suffering**. Jesus is the Christ who will suffer so that we will not have to suffer the wrath of God. He too calls us to suffer the same scorn, abuse and even death on his behalf so that the gospel can be proclaimed to all nations.

Application: Following Jesus is never easy; it is the way of suffering, the way of the cross. We will be tempted to question and doubt Jesus and even abandon him. We might lament: "Why keep going when it is so painful?" "What's the point of obeying when it only brings me hardship on earth?" "Why do others who do not know Jesus seem to have it better?"

These are heartfelt, difficult questions with no easy answers. But, recall that the gospel is about ultimate reality, not bespoke, ever-drifting, ever-changing personal spirituality. The gospel reminds us we are saved not by cheap grace, but a very costly grace. The gospel is about dying to self and about participating in

¹⁵ Another critical OT passage cited is Ps 2:7: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." Also, Jesus is God's "beloved" Son, which points us to God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, which points us to Jesus' sacrifice. When our Lord is transfigured, we once again hear the Father's voice saying Jesus is his "beloved Son" (9:7), and telling Peter and others to listen to he who is the final and greatest revelation of God (cf Col 1:20; Heb 1:1-3).

¹⁶ "Wild animals" is a unique phrase found only in Mark and is perhaps an allusion to Nero's brutal persecution of the Roman Christians who were being fed to wild beasts.

¹⁷ Forty can also allude to the 40 days of Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:28) and the 40 days of Elijah to Mount Horeb (1 Ki 19:8) (both of whom appear at Jesus' transfiguration).

¹⁸ This divinely orchestrated battle between evil and good is a proving ground that Jesus freely chooses to make God's will his own. Jesus' first miracle (1:21-28) and parable (3:27) are offensives against Satan as the "strong one." So, as the stronger man and with the angels on his side, Jesus fulfills what John said was his purpose in appearing, which was "was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

God's marvelous plan of redemption in which he reverses everything about what we think ought to happen.

So, when you are tempted to distance yourself from Christ, remember that he is not a means to our end, but **we are means to his end**. And that end is the glory of God. God will get glory out of you, whether you like it or not. But, how much more is he glorified when we embrace Jesus and follow him on the road marked with suffering.

V. WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE TO JESUS? (DISCIPLESHIP)

So, we come to the final two verses of this rich passage. As a quick recap, we looked at the question "What is the gospel?" in verse 1, understanding it to be a person, Jesus, who is the Christ. Then in verses 2 through 13, we tackled the question "Who is this Jesus?", and saw how Mark presents him as the mighty, Spirit-anointed, authoritative yet suffering Son of God.

In these final two verses, Jesus boldly proclaims the gospel of God, which in turn demands a response. His proclamation is not made in ease and comfort, but once again amidst adversity. Look at **verse 14**: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God[.]" John is arrested, showing he was Jesus' forerunner not just in proclamation but also suffering and eventually, death.

Since Jesus is the gospel, he proclaims it by announcing his arrival in **verse 15**. First, he says "the time is fulfilled." After 400+ years of silence, and centuries of intense waiting and anticipation by his people, God, in the "fullness of time" as Paul puts in Galatians 4:4 (during the reign of Caesar Augustus), God sends his Son, Jesus, to be the world's Savior. But, it's not just an important passing moment in history; it is something so significant that it defines everything that comes after it.¹⁹ And that's because "the kingdom of God is at hand." This is so because the King of kings, the true Son of God, is in the people's midst. In Jesus, the kingdom of God makes a personal appearance and a new era of fulfillment has begun. Caesar instituted Pax Romana, which eventually fell apart, but Christ brings us peace with God forever.

If Jesus is in the people's midst, what then are they to do? What are you to do? We now come to the final question: "**What is your response to Jesus?**" Jesus says there are two things that need to be done: Repent, and believe.

Repent: Repenting is a turning away from sin, viewing it as despicable and loathsome as God does. Let us no longer trivialize or justify our sins. They are an affront against Almighty God! They incur his wrath and bring you only sorrow and brokenness. Look at your sin as God does and be stirred up to turn away from it.

But it is not about getting rid of your sin in order to come to Christ; repentance is not a work. It is a **change of heart** that causes you to turn away from your self-destructive path and return to the Father. Think of the prodigal son in Luke 15 and how he "came to himself", realizing his true need for help, which led to an honest confession

¹⁹ This is expressed in Mark's use of *kairos* for "time" instead of *chronos* (which is used for moment-by-moment passing of time). Furthermore, such time has been "fulfilled," which in the Greek means filled to the brim. Jesus is saying the time for the arrival of God's kingdom was "super full" (Sproul, 18).

of sin ("Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you"), and an actual returning to his father (Luke 15:17-21).

Believe: Jesus also says to "believe in the gospel," which is really to believe in him, since he is the gospel. Belief is more than just intellectual assent or being moved emotionally. It is **commitment**. If I say "I believe my wife is God's gift to me," I am not saying, "I intellectually assent that Stacy is my wife; I factually recognize God's blessing through her." No! I am saying I am committed to her for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, poverty and wealth...to love and cherish her, till death do us part. Your firm commitment of belief goes along with your repentance. Repentance and belief are two sides of the same coin of faith. Repentance turns away from sin while belief turns to Jesus, as the gospel.

Why is Jesus the gospel, good news? He is our salvation, the one who reconciles us to God. Why do we need to be reconciled? Because we have fallen short of God's glory and have sinned terribly against him. How does Jesus save? By his perfect, righteous life, atoning death and undeniable resurrection. Those who receive Christ will receive eternal life, but those who reject him will pass into God's judgment and unimaginable torment in hell. So, if you do not yet know Jesus, repent of your sins and believe in him as your Lord and Savior! All who call upon the name of Christ will be saved (Acts 4:12; Rom 10:13).

Application: For the rest of you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, what will you do in 2026 to help align your heart more and more to God's (repent) and trust in him more (believe)? This is a call to closer discipleship to Jesus. How will you do that?

Consider discipling someone or asking someone to disciple you. **Discipling one another helps your discipleship to Christ.** It also directly carries out HCC's mission to "make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations." What Jesus has to teach us can often only be taught or caught in a relational context with fellow believers. As you go through life with another Christian or talk more deeply about a specific topic like marriage, parenting, career, or personal challenges, you learn from one another what it means to obey Christ and wait upon the Lord.

Just as discipleship is defined by being near to Jesus, a discipling relationship is simply two believers drawing near to one another for the purpose of spiritual growth. It really is that simple and should be straightforward and flexible. Invite someone to read the Bible with you and work through the text; pray for one another and follow up to see what Jesus is teaching you both. That's it!

But, I know it can still be intimidating to actually reach out to someone. Or, perhaps you don't know who to ask. If you're part of a community group (CG), I urge you to first consider someone in your CG, since you see them on a regular basis. If you're not part of a CG, please come to the Welcome Desk or talk to another person here to get plugged into a CG. Also, thankfully there is a new grassroots initiative spearheaded by members Sean and Paul to facilitate discipling relationships. Head to hcc.lv/engdiscipling (or scan the QR code in your insert) for more details and to sign-up! It's a great launching pad for making discipling connections. Again, there is no better way to start the new year than to commit to discipling someone in the church or to ask someone to disciple you.

VI. CONCLUSION

In closing, over and against Roman religion, Mark proclaims Jesus, not Caesar, as the Savior of the world. The world desperately needs the gospel of Christ, not the gospel of Caesar. Over and against bespoke spirituality and metamodernism, Mark presents Jesus as the objective, unchanging, authoritative but suffering Son of God. Beloved, it is *this* Jesus whom we need to believe.

As your most important new year resolution, commit to truly and wholeheartedly following Jesus as his disciple because he is surely worthy of your life and worship.