

## ***Introduction***

When it comes to exegetical writing, the beginner cannot help but identify with Ecclesiastes 1:9, by thinking there is “nothing new under the sun” that can be added to the vast amount that has already been penned in the field of Biblical study. However, there is a certain sense of freedom in realizing the unlikelihood of having an original thought. One comes to realize that a seminary student is not necessarily expected to break new ground, but to demonstrate familiarity with the territory that has already been charted. It is to that end this essay will aspire, attempting to show the concept of “limited good” at work in the Gospel of Mark. This can be seen in a variety of ways, the scope of which will be categorized as follows: socio-economic, socio-political, and supernatural. Hopefully, by examining these classifications, the impact of Jesus will be accentuated. A certain amount of flexibility should be given, as this approach is out of textual sequence. The concept of limited good is defined as a mindset that holds the following to be true:

All conceivable good things in life are finite in number and limited in quantity, [and] there is no way directly within a person’s power to increase the available quantities. It is much as though the obvious fact of land shortage and/or housing opportunity in a densely populated area applied to all other desired things in life: simply not enough to go around. The good things constituting life, like land itself, are seen as inherent in nature, there to be divided and redivided, if possible and necessary, but never to be increased.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Socio-Economic Good***

### Examples of Discipleship

The first instance in which we see the socio-economic aspect of limited good put to the test is in 1:16-20, where Jesus calls his earliest disciples. First he calls Simon and his brother Andrew, and then James and John, the sons of Zebedee. It is not stated as to whether or not these four were all in Zebedee’s employ, or if Simon and Andrew were

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, page 89.

independent fishermen. In either case, Jesus has called them to leave their livelihood on a whim and follow him in his new method of fishing for men. This would have been especially detrimental to Zebedee, as he was left both shorthanded and without heirs, assuming there were no other “sons of thunder.”

It is interesting to note that Simon and Andrew are depicted as casting a net into the sea, and then the explanation is given that they were fishermen. This would seem a logical assumption, hardly one that would need to be spelled out. However, when one considers that the Zebedees are specifically said to be in a boat mending their nets, this suggests that they were better fishermen because they owned a boat and caught enough fish to damage their equipment.<sup>2</sup> Seen this way, Simon and Andrew were perhaps down on their luck as fishermen and ready to try something new, whereas Zebedee would have been able to afford hired hands to replace his sons. This is of course an argument from textual silence, but one that could be made to soften the implicated economic blow.

Jesus continues his vocation-changing trend with Levi/Matthew<sup>3</sup> in 2:13-17, when he calls him to leave his life as a tax (or toll) collector. Unlike the situation with James and John, Levi’s father Alphaeus does not appear to be connected to his son’s chosen vocation. Levi apparently reciprocates Jesus’ invitation to follow him by inviting him to his house to eat, repaying kindness with kindness, as was customary in this honor and shame culture.<sup>4</sup> This of course, draws further suspicion from the Pharisees, who question his choice of table fellowship. In a culture based on the concept of limited good, one who accumulated wealth by exploiting others was not allowing it to be put back into circulation. Therefore, such a person was not to be trusted. In their eyes, Jesus was

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary*, page 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, page 119.

<sup>4</sup> Malina, 95.

guilty not only of associating with sinners, but possibly funding some sort of play for power, which would implicitly threaten their own.

In 10:17-31, there is a striking example of an invitation to discipleship being turned down. Jesus is approached by a man who addresses him as “Good Teacher” and asks him how to inherit eternal life. To the modern reader, Jesus’ reply seems a bit strange, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” He denies the man the expected response of equally exalted language.<sup>5</sup> This can be taken in at least two different ways. Either Jesus is repudiating the comment, as any honorable man of his time would,<sup>6</sup> or he is hinting at his own hidden identity by saying that the man has rightly addressed him as good, for this is an attribute of God.

At any rate, the point is clear: the man is not yet good enough to receive eternal life as his inheritance. Jesus lists six commandments, no doubt familiar to a devout Jew. He seems to repeat the commandment against stealing, adding one about defrauding. Curiously absent however, is the commandment against coveting, possibly a subtle implication of the man’s guilt.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Jesus does not address the man with scorn or deny his claims to have followed the law since his youth. Rather, it reads that Jesus “loved him,” and so the invitation to follow him must be seen as genuine. Sadly, the man decides to turn away and forfeit eternal life, unwilling to part with his many possessions.

### Feeding the Multitudes

Another excellent set of examples can be seen in the feedings of the crowds in 6:30-52 and 8:1-9. In the first instance, the disciples urge Jesus to send the masses away, so that they would have time to purchase provisions. He responds by telling *them* to feed

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<sup>5</sup> Garland, 395.

<sup>6</sup> Malina, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*, page 553.

the crowd. Perplexed, they ask how they will afford to do so. Jesus then gives the fish and loaves to the disciples. They distribute the food to the 5000 hungry men (even more if women and children were present). The disciples received on-the-job training so to speak, for it was their loaves and fish, and their hands that fed the multitude.<sup>8</sup> Yet, later on in verse 6:52, the author of Mark says that their hearts were hardened, and they did not understand about the loaves. It is also odd that they would be utterly astounded at the calming of the sea, as Jesus had already done nearly the exact same thing in 4:35-41.

Their lack of understanding becomes all the more vivid in 8:1-9. Again Jesus and the disciples find themselves among a hungry multitude in the wilderness. This time, the feeding comes at Jesus' suggestion. Yet, the disciples again question the possibility of feeding so many people. Such a question seems astounding, in light of the previous feeding. Nevertheless, Jesus performs a similar miracle, and this time 4000 people are satisfied. Some scholars have tried to argue that these passages are actually two accounts of the same miracle, but their argument breaks down in light of 8:19-20.<sup>9</sup> Here, he painstakingly reminds the disciples of his miraculous power in both occasions, because they are concerned about only having one loaf of bread with them in the boat. Jesus is attempting to warn them about Herod and the Pharisees, but they fail to hear him over the grumbling of their stomachs. Despite all they have seen and been involved in, they are still operating under the mindset of limited good. "The disciples are consistently portrayed as ignorant and obtuse, repeatedly failing to understand what Jesus was trying to teach them."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Witherington, 220.

<sup>9</sup> Witherington, 235.

<sup>10</sup> John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, page 196.

## ***Socio-Political Good***

### Local Authorities

Ironically, those who understood more clearly the implications of Jesus' identity did even more in their attempts to thwart his plan. Though Mark's gospel is chalked full of power struggles and political run-ins, a few key passages have been chosen to exhibit the Jesus' disregard for political limitations. One such example is 2:1-12, in which he heals a paralytic. Before doing so, he tells the man that his sins are forgiven, which gets quite a rise out of the scribes that are present. They were murmuring accusations of blasphemy amongst themselves, which Jesus cues in on and challenges, asking which is easier to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or, "Stand up and take your mat and walk." He does not appear to give them time to answer before healing the man; but even if he had, they would have been hard-pressed to provide an answer. Witherington says it best in his summary of the situation:

The question is not only which is easier to say, but also which is easier to do. Obviously it would be easier to say a person's sins were forgiven because there was no objective way of telling if this was true or not, unlike healing a cripple, where the evidence would either stand up for and support the pronouncement or not. But in regard to which was easier to do, without question it was the healing of the body.<sup>11</sup>

A similar story presents itself in 3:1-6. This time, it is a group of Pharisees who are put to the test with a difficult question from Jesus, "Is it lawful to do good or to harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" Given the choices, one could hardly answer that it was lawful to kill on the Sabbath, and so Jesus' healing is justified. Yet, that is exactly the topic that the Pharisees rush off to conspire with the Herodians about, how to kill Jesus. It is important to note that they do not deny that Jesus has the power to heal, but

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<sup>11</sup> Witherington, 116.

that their issue is with how/when he does it. They are not so much concerned over healing as they are their own loss of influence and respect as the status quo is challenged. Another example of this is 11:17-33, in which the chief priests, scribes, and elders ask Jesus from whence he draws his authority. Jesus again gives them an incredibly difficult question, which they refuse to answer because of the possible implications. In their attempt to save face by not answering the question, they still lose credibility with the onlookers, and once again Jesus proves to be the victor in the battle of the wits.

In 12:13-17, some Pharisees and Herodians have seemingly had enough of Jesus' trick questions, and try to trap *him* in a response instead. They pose a question that was no doubt difficult for any religious authority of the day to answer, whether or not it was lawful to pay taxes to Rome, while still claiming allegiance to God. They even employ a bit of false flattery, which ironically rings truer than they know, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth..." As was mentioned in class, the word ὑπόκρισιν is closely related in the Greek to playing a part in a drama:

*Hypokrisis* once meant "reply" and then in Attic Greek came to mean "playing a part," the "delivery" (of a speech) and finally "pretense." *Hypokritēs* meant "interpreter" (of dreams and riddles), "actor," "reciter" and then "pretender."<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, seeing past their masked hypocrisy, humors them with an answer by pointing out that the image of Caesar is on a denarius, and is rightly paid to him. He then implies that they should render unto God that which bears him image, which is of course humankind itself. In light of such a living consecration, monetary offerings pale in comparison.

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<sup>12</sup> Joel B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, page 352

### Answering to Pilate

Perhaps the puzzling example of Jesus' dealings with the authorities of his day comes in his questioning by Pontius Pilate in chapter 15. His response style towards Pilate is different than all previous interactions. With the disciples, Jesus frequently explained his teachings, and was even willing to engage in debates with Pharisees and the like. Yet, as Pilate probes him with questions about the accusations against his identity, he is strangely quiet. It would seem that at a point in his life where his choice in words would matter the most, Jesus chooses to say precious little at all. With little input from the defendant, Pilate seems perplexed and at a loss for words himself. He seems reluctant to play into the ploy of the chief priests, executing a mere rabble-rouser without just cause, but finds little rebuttal from the would-be Messiah. While Pilate can hardly be considered a sympathizer, he is not an entirely unjust prefect. Eventually, under pressure from the crowds, who ultimately held the power over his reputation with Rome, he orders Jesus to be crucified. Pilate orders the label "King of the Jews" to be placed above Jesus' head, the only accusation that could have possibly threatened Roman rule. This *titulus* is confirmed by all four gospels, albeit in varying forms.<sup>13</sup>

In all their encounters with Jesus, those in earthly authority show their lack of appreciation regarding his identity. They understood that he was a man of divine influence, but would not stand by and watch their own clout become diminished. Yet, all their attempts to keep him down were in vain. They were clearly dealing with a man unlike any they had ever met.

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<sup>13</sup> Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*, page 158.

## *Supernatural Good*

### Close Encounters

In his confrontations with demons, the mission/personage of Jesus is fully understood, and they exhibit most correctly a concern over the concept of limited good. For them, as evil beings, to be in the presence of absolute holiness is to be in abject torture. The first example comes early in the gospel, at 1:21-28 in which a man with an unclean spirit confronts Jesus in the synagogue. The demon questions Jesus' intentions, so to speak, and asks what he has to do with him. He calls Jesus by both name and title, "Jesus of Nazareth / Holy One of God."<sup>14</sup> This of course is not regarded as a positive confession, but an attempt to gain power over Jesus by pronouncing his name. It is interesting that Jesus in this case did not enter the synagogue seeking an altercation. Rather, it is the demon that bursts onto the scene to test Jesus. Jesus takes the challenge in stride, and casts the demon out, without even resorting to making use of its name. Given the shorter Markan narration of the forty days in the wilderness, this is the first real drawn-out showdown between Jesus and the powers of evil. It is also the event that originally makes Jesus famous.

Another well-known demonic encounter came in 5:1-20, on the Gerasene shore. No sooner had Jesus stepped out of the boat, than a man rushes at him from out of the tombs. "The man's home is the unclean place of the dead, and he himself is home to unclean spirits."<sup>15</sup> He is described as nearly beastlike, unable to be restrained by anyone, having broken chains and shackles. This point begs the question, how was he chained and shackled in the first place, if nobody was able to restrain him? It is also unclear as to

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<sup>14</sup> Garland, 71.

<sup>15</sup> Garland, 202.



whether the man became demon-possessed, and then migrated to the tombs, or if the man encountered the demon at the tombs. The latter would give credibility to the Jewish superstition about touching dead bodies, or living near burial sites.

Speculation aside, what we do know is that Jesus decides to deal differently with this man than the one in the synagogue. Jesus asks, “What is your name?” which in the Greek is in the singular form ὄνομά σοι. The reply then comes as a bit of a shock to the reader, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” The demon(s) beg Jesus not to destroy them, and for whatever reason, he grants the request and allows them to enter the 2000 swine nearby. The swine are then drowned in the sea, which does not clearly explain whether the demons themselves were destroyed, or if they somehow dissipated into the waters. The now demon-free man asks Jesus to allow him to become a follower, a request which Jesus refuses (though he had just granted a demonic request), telling him instead to go and proclaim the mercy that had been shown to him. As a result of this event, the townspeople beg Jesus to leave their area, as he had just destroyed their economic livelihood of swine-herding. This is ironic, because they are sending away the One who is capable of feeding multitudes, and who was probably more than capable of providing miraculous restitution for the loss.

There is an interesting, parallel comparison that can be drawn here, between this Gerasene man and the rich man of 10:17-31. This man has just been freed from multiple demonic possessions, and begs Jesus to let him become a follower, an appeal that is declined. On the other hand, the rich man clings to his many worldly possessions, despite Jesus’ exhortation/invitation to give them up and follow him. This point is not extremely significant to the gospel, but is a handy sermon illustration at the very least.

This next exorcism example that will be touched on was chosen because it again shows the disciples' lack of understanding about the power at their disposal. This story is in 9:14-29, which opens with the scribes and disciples in an argument over the inability to cast out a particular demon. It had apparently been afflicting a boy for some number of years, causing him to have seizures, especially near fire and water. Jesus expresses his frustration by saying, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I put up with you?" It is unclear as to whom he is singling out, but it most certainly includes the disciples. Jesus seems to be upset about the unnecessary prolonged amount of time that the boy has to suffer, as well as his disciples lacking the necessary faith to cast it out. The father of the boy asks Jesus, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us," to which Jesus nearly scoffs in reply, "If you are able! – All things can be done for one who believes." The father both affirms his belief and unbelief at the same time, and pleads with Jesus to help him. At this point, the demon is finally cast out, after which the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to do it themselves. His reply comes as a reminder of exactly who it is that bestows spiritual power, "This kind can only come out through prayer." As far as the disciples were concerned, the power to cast out demons was a limited good, one that had been given to them, and therefore needed no further explanation. They had forgotten that they wielded borrowed authority.

### Healing Determination

There are times at which Jesus seemingly contradicts himself regarding spiritual power as a limited good. Two such examples can be seen in 5:25-34 and 7:24-30, in the faith of two very persistent women. In the first instance, the woman is economically drained, having been bled of her money by the very physicians who failed to cure her

physical hemorrhaging. She comes to Jesus as her last resort, having exhausted every other possible solution. It is interesting here that the healing power of Jesus “bleeds” out of him, seemingly without his consent, when she touches his cloak. Knowing that power had been drained from him, Jesus asks “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples treat it as an almost humorous rhetorical question, for there are far too many people around him to track. When the woman comes forward and confesses, Jesus affirms her faith, as if to say that the power of the Holy Spirit at work within him is an unlimited good, and as such is free for the taking. He emphasizes her faith, not the touch of a magical garment.<sup>16</sup>

In stark contrast to the previous healing, in which Jesus was basically pick-pocketed, is the passage of 7:24-30 where Jesus initially refuses to accommodate a woman of equal faith/desperation. In this situation, Jesus seems to be in full control of the dispensing of spiritual power, and is somewhat stubborn in giving it away. He is ostensibly irritable, having been discovered by this Syrophonecian woman, when he would have rather been left alone. He basically deems the demon-possessed girl unworthy of God’s grace because she is not of the house of Israel. In today’s climate of political correctness, one feels like telling Jesus to have a heart, especially since the circumstance involves a child. His reply does offer a small glimmer of hope,<sup>17</sup> “Let the children be fed *first*, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

She accepts her designation, and asks for a secondhand morsel to heal her daughter. Jesus then complies, and she returns home to find the demon has departed. The point then seems to be that her humility is what Jesus was after, and not that he

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<sup>16</sup> Witherington, 188.

<sup>17</sup> Garland, 288.

wanted to her to engage in a battle of the wits, and implied by Horsley.<sup>18</sup> An example of a similar situation can be found in Matthew 8:5-10, in which Jesus was willing to heal the servant of a non-Israelite Centurion. But the Centurion declares himself unworthy of having Jesus present in his home, and instead asks for a remote dispatch of power, of the type seen in Mark 7:24-30. In both cases, those involved acknowledged their own unworthiness in the presence of Jesus.

### ***Conclusion***

Hopefully, this brief overview has accomplished its target goal, which is to show the concept of limited good at work in the Gospel of Mark. Taking into account what has been exhibited, Jesus' ministry flew in the face of all that was established and understood to be the norm of how the world worked, on basically all levels. While he did promote economic relief and engage in political skirmishes, he of course came to do much more than that. Had his primary goal been to overthrow political oppression, and liberate the people of Israel to a more prosperous way of life, then he ultimately failed. However, Jesus came to set mankind free from the bondage of sin, by paying the ultimate sacrifice of unlimited good. Considering what he has done, we too should humble ourselves in his awesome presence, and share the abundance of his merciful salvation with others.

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<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story, The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*, page 207.