

+ Mark 1:21-28 + Know Whom you're Following + 4th Sunday after the Epiphany + 1 February 2009 +

Have you ever followed someone? Maybe you attended a wedding and were unsure where to find the reception hall. So you followed a friend. Maybe you played "Follow the Leader" as a kid. Maybe you followed someone in the midst of some bad weather, keeping your eye on their taillights while the snow came pouring down.

When you're following a friend, especially in an unfamiliar location, it can be quite distressing if you realize the person you're following isn't who you're supposed to follow. A little worry might even creep in there if you realize you're going in the wrong direction or maybe even getting lost. ...But then your friend calls your cell phone wondering, "Where are you?" Pretty soon you reconnect and you make it to your destination safe and sound.

You and I live in a world where countless voices want us to follow them—some for good, but most not so much. Many make great promises if we follow them, but only leave us heartbroken, empty, guilty or even lost. Do you know whom you follow? Amidst all those voices demanding our attention, we can easily lose the one voice we need to follow. Sometimes we have to realize that the hard way. Sometimes we're so far astray we don't even realize how lost we are. Sometimes we think we're following the right voice when it's actually the siren song of a demon of darkness. So how do we know whom to follow? How do we know which voice is worth following and why all others should be ignored? This morning Mark helps us to **KNOW WHOM YOU'RE FOLLOWING** and how to know.

If you follow someone, it's always good to know how to identify them. Maybe you pay attention to the make, model, color, even license plate number of their car. When it comes to the leader we follow through this life, we're able to identify him too. First, **you'll know him by what he says.**

It was very early in Jesus' ministry. He had just started preaching in public. He was about 30 years old, a relative newbie as far as religious teachers go. Jesus didn't have much of a following yet, but right from the get-go he was no ordinary Jewish rabbi. One Sabbath as was common custom, Jesus went to the local synagogue in the town of Capernaum along the coast of the Sea of Galilee. As was also the custom, the visiting rabbi—Jesus—was asked to teach, but that's where the story takes a different turn. ***"The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law."*** To the people listening that Sabbath morning, Jesus' teaching was amazing. He taught ***"as one who had authority...not as the teachers of the law"***. Jesus' message and his way of teaching were like nothing they had ever seen.

You see, Jewish teachers of the Law rarely taught directly from the Word of God. They spent most of their time appealing to the experts—long-dead rabbis. When they did teach about the Word of God, they made it a rulebook filled with countless laws and regulations. For example, one could walk only so many steps in one direction on a Sabbath or they would be "working". When it came to God's command to return 10% to the Lord, they interpreted that as not just 10% of the harvest, but the pious were expected to give 10% of everything, even leftovers. By turning Scripture into a rulebook, these teachers burdened souls with guilt, but Jesus didn't do that.

Jesus' teaching was so amazing because he proclaimed the Gospel. He proclaimed the good news of sins forgiven—not by man's action, but only through him. We're not sure what Jesus preached at that Sabbath service, but from elsewhere we get an idea of his basic message as he once quoted the prophet Isaiah, ***"The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind..."*** Jesus had come to proclaim the good news that he himself would restore those left with nothing, but sin's guilt. He himself would liberate those held captive in the chains of sin, and he himself would restore the sight of those blinded by sin's ignorance.

He proclaimed that good news with divine authority. He proved he was more than some wise teacher or a model for living. By his teaching, Jesus proved he was God's undeserved love for all revealed in the flesh. The voice of Jesus was a new voice calling the people to follow him as he preached the truth with divine authority. Unlike the rabbis, Jesus was completely consistent with Scripture, because he was the source of Scripture. It's no surprise, then, why the people were so amazed, but there was no way Satan was going to let Jesus go unchallenged.

Mark writes, ***"Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'"*** It's unclear if this man was already among the people and was possessed by this demon or if this demon-possessed man stormed into the synagogue while Jesus was preaching. Either way the spirit that controlled this man was evil. Literally it was ***"unclean"***, absolutely filthy and disgusting before the holy God—a servant of Satan, the father of lies, the prince of darkness. On the surface his message was also amazing. This demon made that man speak things he surely would not have known on his own. Satan knew who Jesus of Nazareth was and his purpose in coming. He knew Jesus had come to defeat and destroy him, as the promised Son of God, so this demon was sent to hinder Jesus and his work.

On the surface what he said was truth. This demon properly identified Jesus as **“the Holy One of God”**—the promised Son of God who would deliver mankind, but remember why he was there. The demon sought to cause confusion among Jesus’ hearers, maybe even cause the weed of false belief to grow in their hearts and kill the newly planted faith there. “If those are the words of the father of lies, how can we believe in what this Jesus has to say?” Others might’ve thought Jesus to be a political Messiah as many had hoped during that time of Roman rule. Through these lies, Satan sought to hinder Jesus’ work by twisting the truth and perhaps steal souls.

That takes us back to our original question. Whom do you follow? **You’ll know whom to follow by what he says.** On the one hand, we have Satan twisting truth into lies to hurt souls and hinder Jesus. On the other hand, we have Jesus who not only proclaims the good news of sins forgiven, but also comes to save. Know whom you follow! For our eternal good, we follow the One who proclaims the truth in all power and grace!

So what happened to the demon-possessed man? Was Jesus just full of words? How can we be sure of whom we follow? **You’ll know him by what he does!** Out of concern for the man and for his hearers, Jesus commanded sternly, **“Be quiet! Come out of him!”** Instantly, **“the evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.”**

You’ll know whom you follow by what he does. The way the evil spirit treated that man shows clearly who Satan is. His actions were terrifying. He had literally taken control of the man—not to help or save or bless, but to hurt, corrupt and destroy. While possessing the man, the demon sought to undermine Jesus’ work and his message, but when Jesus cast him out, the evil spirit did all he could to harm the man.

Hurting and corrupting and destroying have been the goals of Satan since he rebelled against God long ago. Since then, Satan has sought to destroy what God has created, to ruin souls and to bring pain and misery into every life, especially the lives of those who follow Christ. He tempted Adam and Eve to doubt God’s promises and brought death and corruption into our world. He battled Christ through friend and foe to stop him on his way to the cross. He brings strife into Christian congregations who teach God’s Word in truth and purity to turn people away from the truth. He attacks believers like us with misery and grief and pain. Satan only wants to hurt and destroy us.

By his actions, you will know him. He is the father of lies. There are times when he appears like an angel of light offering great blessing to those who follow him, when in reality he is a demon of darkness seeking to destroy. We dare not follow nor cling to the one cast out into eternal darkness, but we follow and cling to the One who came to save.

With his almighty Word, Jesus proved he had power over darkness, over demons and over Satan. Jesus’ actions showed he came to save—to create life, to restore our relationship with the holy God. In that Galilean synagogue, Jesus briefly showed by his actions why we follow him. You see, Jesus didn’t come to be a wise teacher or a great moral example, but he came to save. He rescued his hearers from the lies of the evil one. He rescued that man from the control of Satan. Even more so, Jesus proved why he had come—to save us.

Yes, it was early in Jesus’ ministry and he was going to do battle with Satan at every turn over the next three years, but eventually the victory would be his. The demon could not rebel against Jesus’ divine command. Though he tried by turning humanity against him, Satan could not stop Jesus either. Jesus eventually went to the cross and by his sacrifice he conquered sin and Satan. Even when he bowed his head in death, victory belonged to Christ, so not even death could hold him in the tomb. Like that screaming evil spirit who left the man, Satan could scream all he wanted, but he was no match for Jesus Christ our Savior.

He still is no match for Christ our Savior. Yes, Satan does all he can to make our lives and the life of the Church miserable, but the old evil foe is no match for our champion, Jesus Christ. The One who gave orders to evil spirits still stands victorious today. In Christ alone we can be sure the truth of the Gospel will never be lost. In Christ alone we can be sure we will prevail when the world closes in on us, when our sinful natures betray us and when the seductive voice of Satan calls us to abandon Christ.

By their actions, you know whom to follow. Satan seeks to hurt and destroy you. Christ seeks to save and give you life. By faith in Christ and through his Word, you’ll know whom you’re following. Through the Word, you can follow the One who gives life. Through the Word, you can always be on guard against the old evil foe. Through the Word, you can be sure that Christ, your leader through thick and thin, will never lead you astray, but will lead you to the greatest destination of all—the eternal joy of heaven. Amen.