
Losing Life for Others in the Face of Death: Mark's Standards of Judgment¹

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One way to understand the purpose of the Gospel of Mark is to discern the standards of judgment for human behavior that govern the narrative. The standards of judgment are the values and beliefs implicit in the narrative world by which readers are led to judge the characters and the events. The narrator does not “tell” us what these standards are. Rather, the narrator “shows” us these standards in the depictions of characters and the description of events.¹

Thus, we infer the standards of judgment from features of Mark's narrative, such as evaluative comments by the narrator, the teachings of Jesus, the actions and fate of the characters, the words of God, quotations from scripture, and so on. From these, we can see the positive standards that the narrative promotes as well as the negative standards that the narrative condemns. Mark engages in a rhetoric of contrast whereby he promotes one set of standards and at the same time condemns the opposite set of standards. Seeing the positive and negative standards in juxtaposition to each other is illuminating. From the standards of judgment, we get a picture of the moral backbone and purpose of the Gospel.

The two ways: Saving one's life or losing one's life for others

A study of standards of judgment shows that the Gospel of Mark is a tightly woven narrative reflecting two contrasting ways of life. At one point in the narrative, Jesus rebukes Peter, saying: “Get behind me, Satan, because you are not thinking the things of God but the things of humans” (8:33). Here is a contrast between two sets of values, two orientations to life:

- the things of God, that is, what God wills for people and
- the things of people, that is, what people want for themselves (what people think in their fear and blindness is best for themselves).

The Markan Jesus states these contrasting standards at the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem (8:22-10:52). On the way there, Jesus elaborates these standards in teaching to his disciples.

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The disciples resist Jesus at every point, even though they eventually accept his teachings. So the journey becomes a clash of values between Jesus who teaches what God wills for people and the disciples who exemplify what people want for themselves. On the way, Jesus prophesies three times to the disciples about his impending persecution and death (8:31-9:1; 9:30-50; 10:32-45). After each prophecy, the disciples show that they do not understand or accept his teaching. After each of these reactions, Jesus explains to his disciples the values of the rule of God that underlie his words and actions.

The teachings that follow these three prophecies on the way to Jerusalem are the core standards of Mark's Gospel. After the first prophecy, Jesus says: “Those who want to save their lives will lose them, but whoever will lose their lives for me and the good news will save them” (8:35). After the second prophecy, Jesus teaches: “If anyone wants to be great among you, that person is to be least of all and everyone's servant” (9:35). After the third prophecy, Jesus says: “Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be most important is to be everyone's slave. For even the son of humanity came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:43-45).

Each of these teachings involves a contrast between acquisition (saving one's life) and relinquishment (losing one's life for the good news). People who follow the world's standards seek to acquire wealth, status, and power for themselves. This way of life is

motivated by fear. By contrast, people who follow Jesus' standards welcome the blessings of the kingdom and are thereby enabled to relinquish life, status, and power in order to bring the blessings of this kingdom to others. This way of life is made possible by faith and grants courage. Thus, for Mark, the two ways of life are "saving one's life out of fear" or "losing one's life for others out of faith." The one way involves securing one's life for one's self, and the other way involves risking one's life for others. The following chart shows the characteristic Markan standards of these two ways.

<i>What people want for themselves</i>	<i>What God wants for people</i>
self-centered	other-centered
save one's own life	lose one's life for the good news
acquire the world	give up possessions
be great	be least
lord over others	be servant to all
be anxious	have faith
fear	courage
harming others	saving others
loyalty to self	loyalty to God for the world

Mark's narrative consistently promotes the one way and condemns the other. As such, the characters in Mark's narrative are stereotypical figures who embody one or the other of these two ways. Jesus embodies "what God wills for people." He heals, drives out demons, pardons sins, feeds hungry people, confronts oppressors, and dies as a result of being persecuted for this mission. Also, the minor characters who come to Jesus for healing often exemplify "the things of God." They have faith and are willing to serve and to be least. By contrast, the Jewish and Gentile authorities embody "what people want." Because they are afraid, they seek to save their honor and to maintain their positions of power.² They aggrandize themselves at the expense of others. Finally, the disciples vacillate between the two ways. They are torn between, on the one hand, following Jesus in service to the good news and, on the other hand, following Jesus in order to acquire status and power for themselves. In these characterizations, Mark promotes the values and beliefs of the kingdom by positive example, and Mark rejects the opposite values and beliefs by negative example. Mark means to persuade hearers of his Gospel to embrace values that will create a society of mutual service, free from oppression.

The way of the world: The fearful saving of self

The negative standards reflect Mark's view of human sinfulness, namely, that people are self-oriented and self-serving. People want

2. It is inappropriate to see Mark's portrayal of the Jewish authorities as fostering anti-Semitism. The character-types in Mark are a rhetorical strategy that present caricatures of moral choices. Like the disciples, real people have good and bad traits. Also, the choice Mark offers to readers is not between Judaism and Christianity, for all the major characters in the narrative are Jewish.

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to "save their lives" (8:35), to "acquire the world" (8:36), to "be great" (9:35), and to "lord over" people (10:43-44).

The Jewish and Gentile authorities

As indicated, the authorities are given a stereotypical characterization to illustrate the negative standards. As depicted in the narrative, they exemplify the fearful saving of self. They have status, power, and security, and they are bent on maintaining them. They have taken control of the vineyard of Israel for themselves and do not bear the fruit on behalf of Israel's people, which God requires of them (12:1-12). They love their importance and they abuse their power: They love to be greeted in the markets; they want the best seats in the synagogue and at the banquets; and they devour the houses of widows (12:38-40). At the crucifixion, they ridicule Jesus because he "cannot save himself" (15:31).

For Mark, the quest to maintain power and status is motivated by fear (11:18). In the Markan portrayals, the Jewish and Gentile authorities are afraid. Herod fears John the Baptist (6:20). Pilate defers to the crowd (15:15). The Jewish authorities fear Jesus' popularity (15:10). They fear losing their position as a result of Jesus' activity (12:7), and they fear losing face with the crowds (6:26; 12:12). Such fear is the opposite of faith/trust in God, which brings courage in the face of threat and loss.

To protect their power and status, the authorities destroy others. Although Herod considers John the Baptist to be a righteous man, he nevertheless executes John because he does not want to break his oath to Herodias' daughter, for fear of losing face before "the most important" and "the greatest" people of Galilee (6:26). Although Pilate thinks that Jesus is innocent and that the high priests have handed him over out of envy, he nevertheless executes Jesus in order to "do the satisfactory thing" for the crowd (15:15). Also, out of envy, the Jewish leaders seek to trap, discredit, and destroy Jesus. They bend the law, arrest Jesus surreptitiously (14:7), suborn witnesses (14:55), hold a kangaroo court (15:3), and stir up the crowd to release Barabbas (15:11)—all in order to maintain their status and their authority over the people.

The disciples

The disciples often reflect the same values. Although the disciples leave all to follow Jesus, they desire to acquire status and power

from following Jesus. Early on, the disciples are enamored with the crowds (1:37). On the journey to Jerusalem, they argue about who is greatest among them (9:33-34). James and John ask if they can sit on the right and left of Jesus in his glory in the age to come (10:35-40). When the other ten disciples find out about this, they become angry (10:41). The disciples have followed Jesus in the hope of acquiring glory and power.

So, too, are the disciples fearful. They are afraid in the storm on the lake (4:40). They are anxious about how to feed people in the desert (6:34-37; 8:4). They are afraid to ask Jesus about his death (9:32). They betray, flee, or deny Jesus, presumably in order to save themselves. Fear for themselves underlies their resistance to understanding, their lack of faith, and their failure to be faithful to the end.

In their anxious quest to acquire honor and power, the disciples harm others and generate dissension. They argue with one another about who is greatest (9:34; 10:41); they stop an exorcist from driving out demons in Jesus' name (9:38); they rebuke the people who bring little children to Jesus for a blessing (10:13); and they vie for honors from Jesus (10:35-45). In response to Jesus' predictions of death, they seek to secure themselves. They become arrogant, exclusive, competitive, and domineering. The disciples have bought into the values of the culture as depicted in the story. The disciples do not have the power and status that the authorities have, but they want them and they strive to attain them.

Mark's gospel condemns the self-oriented, fear-filled quest for security, status, and power as contrary to what God wants people to be. People who embrace these standards are destructive of others and ultimately of themselves. The result is a society of conflict and oppression. In Mark's view, the ultimate consequence of a destructive life is to incur God's judgment against them (9:42-48; 12:40; 14:62).

The vision for life: The courage to risk for others

Characters who live the standards of the rule of God are willing to "lose their life for Jesus and the good news" (8:35), to "be least of all and a servant of all" (9:35), and to "be everyone's slave" (10:43-45). These sayings represent what God wills for people. While the Jewish and Gentile leaders, in Mark's portrayal, think that acquiring status and power over others makes them great, by contrast Jesus considers that the truly great human being gives up the status and power that one has, or feels entitled to, on behalf of those with less power and status.

In Mark, Jesus lifts up particular metaphors as paradigms of these standards. The metaphor for being least is a child or a house servant (9:35-37). The metaphor for the use of power is a servant or slave (10:44), because the role of "slave" exists to benefit others and offers no opportunity to use power over others for self-aggrandizement. These models of greatness are a contrast to the leaders of the Gentile nations who lord over people (10:42-43). The values of the kingdom turn the world upside down, so that the roles on the bottom become the moral paradigm for all human

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relations. Jesus does not give these models to people who are forced to serve or be least—slaves or women or children. Rather, Jesus gives these models of relinquishment to people (the authorities) who already have status or power and want to maintain it and to people (the disciples) who do not have status or power but who want to acquire it for themselves. In thus turning the world upside down, Jesus clearly opposes oppression. He means to stop the cycle of oppression and replace it with a cycle of service. As such, Mark promotes service, not servitude.

Minor characters

Minor characters embody these positive standards of judgment. Suppliants serve by bringing others for healing (2:3; 7:32; 8:22) or by coming on behalf of a relative (5:23; 7:26). The Syrophenician woman is least by being willing to accept Jesus' designation of her as a little dog in order to get her daughter healed (7:28). The poor widow gives out of her need, "her whole living" (12:41-44). An unnamed woman uses expensive ointment to anoint Jesus ahead of time for his burial (14:3-9). Joseph of Arimathea takes courage and approaches Pilate for the right to bury Jesus (15:43). Women go to anoint Jesus' body at the grave (16:1-3). Throughout the Gospel, women in particular not only embody the Markan standards of judgment but also serve as models for the disciples.

The disciples

The disciples sometimes exemplify these standards. They leave their homes, families, and occupations to follow Jesus in the service of the good news (1:14-20; 10:28-29). They serve Jesus in many ways: They protect him from the crowds (3:9), provide a boat for him (4:1), distribute food in the desert (6:34-44; 8:1-10), obtain a donkey (11:1-8), and prepare the Passover meal (14:12-16). Also, as "fishers for people," they go from village to village depending on others for hospitality—food and shelter and clothes—in order to drive out demons and anoint the sick for healing (6:7-13). They continue to follow Jesus until confronted with death.

Jesus

For Mark, Jesus is the primary example of the standards of the kingdom. He serves people in his healings, his exorcisms, his pardons, his feedings, and his preaching, without seeking acclamation for himself (e.g., 1:43; 5:34). He speaks the truth of God whether people favor him or reject him (12:14). He refuses to lord over others. As a result, he is persecuted by those whom he condemns. In his execution, Jesus manifests the standards of the rule of God (15:1-37): He is least in the society as a human being ridiculed and rejected on behalf of the kingdom of God; he has relinquished power over anyone; and he loses his life in the service of bringing good news to the world. At Gethsemane, Jesus is afraid to die, but his prayer reveals the orientation of his life—"Abba, Father...not what *I want* but what *you want*" (14:36). Jesus is the opposite of self-oriented. He is God-centered for others.

Living for others despite loss and persecution

In Mark, God wills that all people receive the blessings of the kingdom. And God wills for people to share the kingdom, to be agents who live so as to bring the blessings of the kingdom to others. The blessings of the kingdom are not an end in themselves, as if people are to benefit from them and the matter stops there. The kingdom calls for an orientation of a life lived for others. Living by this kingdom is nothing less than a Copernican-like revolution from being self-centered to being other-centered for the gospel.

Yet God also wills for people to take risks for the kingdom, to endure loss and persecution when necessary and unavoidable for the mission of the kingdom. This Markan view of "suffering" calls for clarification. First, Mark does not value suffering or loss for its own sake. Rather, Jesus tells his disciples to pray that persecution not come (14:36). Second, in Mark's narrative, God does not will for people to suffer due to illness, disability, demonic possession, or the destructive forces of nature. The extensive Markan healings, exorcisms, and nature miracles demonstrate that God wills to overcome these. Therefore, when Jesus tells people to "take up your cross and follow me," he is not referring to suffering that comes from non-human forces, such as demons, illness, or nature.

Finally, God does not call people to suffer on behalf of people in a position of power over them. Jesus does not tell slaves that enforced service is among the standards of the rule of God. Hence, Jesus would not call for a wife to endure abuse to serve the needs of her husband nor for a child to endure abuse to serve the needs of the parent. On the contrary, God wills to relieve all oppression by humans over other humans. In Mark, Jesus confronts and condemns such human oppression wherever he encounters it. In fact, it is precisely his opposition to human oppression that results in their persecution of him.

The Markan Jesus calls disciples to "lose their lives for me and the good news." This involves two steps: "deny yourself" and "take up your cross." "Denying oneself" refers to what one gives up in order to live for others. "Taking up one's cross" refers to the ordeals one will face as a result of living for others.

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First, those who have status and power are called to deny themselves by relinquishing these on behalf of others. For Mark, God is calling people to give up the self-serving values of the dominant culture and to live by the true status and power in the service of God's realm. Because of the nature of the good news and because of the way the world is, people who live by the good news will risk the loss of these things in the course of living their commitments.

Second, people are to take up their cross. The "cross" of suffering that God calls people to endure is the unavoidable persecution that comes to followers in the course of proclaiming the good news of God's realm of salvation. Proclaiming the good news often leads followers to challenge oppression. In Mark, God does not give agents of the kingdom the right to use force to stop those who oppress; otherwise, they would become like those whom they condemn. As a result, those who confront oppression may suffer persecution at the hands of the oppressors they condemn, just as Jesus did. In Mark, this suffering by persecution in the course of proclaiming the good news is the "cross" that God calls people to bear for the sake of the world, a cross people take up because they have chosen to live by the good news of the kingdom of God. Hence, in Mark, Jesus does not call people to suffer, as if this were some virtue in itself. Rather, the Markan Jesus calls people to proclaim the good news—in spite of the suffering they may encounter because of this commitment.

Followers who are not prepared for such risks will shrink in fear and avoidance. A contemporary parallel to Mark's situation may help to clarify.

In the late 1980s, a volunteer approached a leader of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States serving refugees from Central America, and she asked to join in the work of the movement.

The leader said to her, "Before you say whether you really wish to join us, let me pose some questions:

Are you ready to have your telephone tapped by the government? Are you prepared to have your neighbors shun you? Are you strong enough to have your children ridiculed and harassed at school? Are you ready to be arrested and tried, with full media coverage? If you are not prepared for these things, you may not be ready to join the movement. For when push comes to shove, if you fear these things, you will not be ready to do what needs to be done for the refugees.”

The woman decided to think it over.

Similarly, if followers of Jesus are not ready to risk their status and their power or are not prepared for persecution, then they will not be ready to proclaim the good news. The rhetoric of Mark's gospel leads hearers to confront their fear and to accept the persecution that may come in the course of following Jesus. Mark's gospel calls people to celebrate the life of the kingdom and to oppose oppression in spite of the risks.

Faith

For Mark, living the standards of the kingdom is possible by faith, by trusting God. The total response to the arrival of the kingdom, rightly understood, is to “put faith in the good news of the kingdom” (1:13). The arrival of the power of the kingdom in the person of Jesus makes such faith possible. Faith is trust in the God for whom all is possible—the God who heals, drives out demons, calms storms, provides bread in the desert, and raises one to life and salvation in the new age. This faith gives courage. When one ultimately counts on God for life, one can dare to risk life for others (10:21). Thus, faith is the opposite of fear (4:40; 5:36; 6:50). In Mark, the faith that one's future salvation is in God's care gives one neither complacency nor passive security but the courage to risk even persecution—to live a life of abandon for the good news (10:29-30; 14:36).

The narrative calls followers of Jesus to have faith in God as Jesus had faith in God, the faith that enabled Jesus to live for the kingdom even though it led to his execution (8:34). By telling his story of Jesus, Mark seeks to evoke such faith and, in so doing, to turn the culture around from a society that is destructive to a society that promotes life. The ultimate consequence of living the standards of the kingdom is resurrection and eternal life in the age to come (10:30).

The transition: New life, new sight, empowerment

How do we reverse oppression and create a world of mutual service? Such a transition from “thinking the things of humans” to “thinking the things of God” is perhaps the most difficult change human beings ever make. How do people change in such profoundly fundamental ways? How is it possible to break the tenacious grip of anxious self-preservation so as to be radically committed to the well-being of others? How do self-oriented

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people become God-centered in service to others? How are people enabled and empowered to relinquish the values of the world and embrace the standards of the kingdom? How do people come to a place where they are willing to face persecution and death for these convictions?

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Blessings of the kingdom

First, like the characters in the story, the hearers of Mark are invited to receive the kingdom, for “unless you receive the rule of God as a little child [receives], you definitely will not enter into it” (10:15). The entire first half of Mark's story is the offer of this kingdom that brings liberation from all forms of oppression. Jesus heals the sick, drives out demons, pardons sins, cleanses lepers, restores the disabled, delivers from the threats of nature, welcomes the outcast, challenges inhumane laws, calls the wealthy to give to the poor, confronts fraud and extortion in the Temple, and challenges the leaders of Israel to produce the fruits of the vineyard. Out of compassion, the Markan Jesus offers the power of the kingdom to restore people to physical and moral wholeness. Receiving and entering this realm of God is a matter of having faith that life, now and in the future, comes from God. The blessings of the kingdom awaken such faith and make faith possible. The kingdom offers a vision to live for, a vision large enough to encompass the transformation of the world.

Seeing the world upside down

Second, beginning with the second half of the Gospel, Mark's narrative leads hearers to experience a fundamental change of perception—to see that this vision of the kingdom is large enough to live and to die for—that is, to understand that, in the face of all our human resistance, God wants people to risk status, power, and even life to bring the liberating life of the kingdom to others.

How does Jesus try to get the disciples to see and understand these standards? He teaches them, corrects their inappropriate behavior, tells them about his own death, and gives them models—children, slaves, servants, women—to show them what they are to be like. He explains to them what they are not to be like—kings who lord it over their subjects, the wealthy who refuse to give up their wealth, and those who want to acquire the world.

Yet, in the end, Jesus' greatest witness to new sight is his own life. Can the disciples *see* this man as the son of God, the agent who represents and reflects the very kingdom of God? He exercised the power of the kingdom on behalf of others to the point where he was rejected by society's leaders, abandoned by the crowds, betrayed by friends, relinquishing his power over others, misunderstood by all, and dying as a result of opposing the oppressive authorities. If the disciples can see revealed in the faithfulness of this executed man the embodiment of God's idea of true greatness (15:2, 18, 26), then they will have seen the world upside down. They will see that God wants people to bring life to others even when they end up being persecuted, shamed, and killed for doing it. Thus, at the crucifixion, God's full standards of judgment for humans are revealed. There, the full commitment of Jesus to the values of God's rule is revealed, even in the face of death. And the resurrection of Jesus is God's affirmation that the way Jesus lived and his willingness to die for the kingdom is the way for all humans to live.

Empowerment by example

Third, Mark's narrative empowers hearers to follow Jesus. As presented by Mark, Jesus' courage is more than example and revelation. Jesus' commitment in the face of execution empowers people to live for the good news in the face of rejection and loss. The narrative empowers hearers by leading them to identify with Jesus. The narrative distances hearers from identification with the Jewish and the Gentile leaders, because these leaders will kill others to save themselves. The narrative initially leads hearers to identify with the disciples. However, when the disciples betray or abandon Jesus to save themselves, hearers distance themselves from the disciples. In the end, hearers identify with Jesus, because he is the one figure left in the story who embodies the values of the rule of God. In this regard, Jesus is not a *heroic* figure (he dies in humiliation and weakness), but a *faithful* figure. Jesus is afraid and does not want to die, yet he is willing to do what God wills, namely, to remain faithful to the good news despite the cost (14:39). Hearers identify with the courage of Jesus and come away from the story saying, "I, too, want to be faithful in the face of death." Through the rhetoric of this story, Mark leads hearers not so much to believe something *about* Jesus as to *be like* Jesus.

Empowerment by the purging of fear

The narrative also empowers by purging hearers of fear. Through identification with Jesus, hearers face the experience of abandonment, rejection, mockery, physical suffering, and death. By going

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vicariously through the abandonment, rejection, mockery, physical suffering, and death of Jesus in their experience of the narrative, hearers face with courage the fears that might otherwise paralyze them. So when the Gospel ends with the women running away from the empty grave, terrified and telling no one (16:8), it is the hearers who are left to tell this story. It is the hearers who are led to say: "I will not be paralyzed into silence as the disciples and the women were. I will do what God wants, not what I want. I will tell, even if it means persecution and death." At the end, when all the characters in the story have failed to proclaim the good news about Jesus, the hearers themselves will complete the Gospel by proclaiming with courage. In Jesus' absence, they will live as Jesus lived, with faith and courage, until Jesus returns.

The power of example

How can a life and a death effect such empowerment? I can best illustrate it with a story about a concentration camp for prisoners in the Far east during World War II.

In a concentration camp of American prisoners, the guards had so intimidated the prisoners and so violated every code of civilized treatment that conditions were horrible. The prisoners had tried to cope by a dog-eat-dog existence. To survive, each man was out for himself. Prisoners stole food and medical supplies for themselves, robbed each other, ratted on other prisoners in order to get favors from the guards, and isolated new prisoners who came into the camp.

One day as they were coming in from work detail and putting away the tools, the guards discovered that a shovel was missing. The guards were irate and lined the prisoners up and threatened them.

Finally the guards said, "If the person who stole this shovel does not come forward in ten seconds, we are going to shoot all of you."

After a long silence, the guards cocked their guns and prepared to shoot. Finally, one of the prisoners stepped forward. The guards pounced on him, beat him with their gun butts, and shot him to death.

When the guards told the prisoners to finish putting away the tools, a strange thing happened. All the

shovels were there. No shovel had been missing after all. In shock and silence the prisoners went back to the barracks.

It took a while for it to sink in that one of the prisoners had voluntarily given his life so that the rest would not be shot. Gradually, the attitudes of the prisoners began to change in the camp. Other acts of sacrifice began to take place. Prisoners began to share medical supplies with each other. They formed teams to attend to each other's wounds and illnesses. Some created make-shift artificial limbs for those who had lost an arm or a leg in the war. Some sick prisoners actually gave their food to weak prisoners who had a better chance for survival. Others risked death by sneaking outside the camp to procure food for the sick. They established a secret system of communication to give each other information and support. They welcomed new prisoners and quickly incorporated them into their network. The generosity was contagious.

In the midst of the most horrible conditions, there emerged a remarkably humane society of prisoners, all made possible because of the effect of this one fellow prisoner who gave his life for them to live.

And just as the example of one man empowered the other prisoners to take risks for each other, just so the telling of the story about him enables those who hear it to experience that empowerment to their own lives.³

Just so, for Mark, the example of Jesus and the story about him empowers those who hear it to change and to transform their society. Thus, in Mark's portrayal, Jesus does not die so that sins might be forgiven (Jesus offers forgiveness apart from his death—2:5); rather, his faithfulness in the face of execution liberates others from the grip of self-preservation so that they too might live for others, even in the face of loss and persecution. Thus, Jesus' whole life, his faithfulness in death, and his resurrection liberate hearers from the self-oriented fear of death and empower them to live faithfully for others, resulting in humane communities of mutual service. And even if the hearers have themselves stumbled before in the face of persecution, they see new hope in the story, for Jesus remains loyal to his own frightened and stumbling disciples. Even after the disciples have failed to be faithful, Jesus promises to go ahead of them—including Peter, who denied him—in order to begin the mission anew from Galilee (16:7). The narrative thus encourages hearers to recommit themselves to proclaiming the good news and to bringing the kingdom *now*, despite past failures and ongoing persecution.

3. This story is based on an incident recounted in an autobiographical work about a Japanese concentration camp in Thailand during World War II, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, by Ernest Gordon (Harper, 1962). The work is a remarkable story of people who discovered a humane way of living in consonance with the portrait of the kingdom of God in Mark.

With [Mark's] positive portrayal of minor characters, the kingdom belongs to ordinary folks, unnamed and unrecognized, who have quietly made great sacrifices to serve their families or neighbors or someone in need. These are people who in very common situations courageously stand up for justice, speak up when others are silent, or who advocate on behalf of others—even when their actions result in misunderstanding and rejection.

Contemporary Markan Christians

In order to grasp Mark's standards of judgment more clearly, it might be helpful to identify some contemporary figures whose lives bear the stamp of Markan Christianity. Down through history, the standards of judgment in the Gospel of Mark have been reflected in many people who have lived faithful and courageous lives of service for others. Markan Christians are represented by the orders of the church that called people to give up their livelihood and security to preach the gospel or care for the poor and the ill. Countless missionaries who have left home and country to bring the gospel to remote parts of the world belong in the Markan trajectory. In modern times, their numbers will include those who risked their lives to rescue Jews in Nazi Germany. Mother Teresa and all who have been inspired to be like her are to be counted among Christians who live out Mark's vision. And we might point to all who joined Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle for civil rights in the United States. In all nations where people have struggled in non-violent ways to free themselves from oppression—in Latin America, in South Africa, in the former Soviet Union, and in Asia—people have turned to Mark for courage to take risks in the fight against injustice.

Especially for Mark, with his positive portrayal of minor characters, the kingdom belongs to ordinary folks, unnamed and unrecognized, who have quietly made great sacrifices to serve their families or neighbors or someone in need. These are people who in very common situations courageously stand up for justice, speak up when others are silent, or who advocate on behalf of others—even when their actions result in misunderstanding and rejection. These are people who have an active sense of God's liberating presence in daily life. They carry out their occupations as vocations of caring service, sometimes at great risk.

Perhaps because Mark was written from a peasant perspective and portrays Jesus as a marginalized figure, many groups of poor and oppressed people have turned to Mark for empowerment that comes from knowing that they are not alone in their struggle. Many people who face discrimination and deprivation—such as Hispanic and African American women and men—have turned to Mark, where they find Jesus to be a very human figure who is in radical solidarity with them and who struggles with them in their plight. Also, many communities of women have found encouragement from Mark's challenge to men to relinquish their power over women, from Mark's portrayal of faithful female followers, and from Mark's call for mutual service in a "discipleship of equals."⁴

Such examples may get us in touch not only with the characters within Mark's narrative who embody Markan standards, they may also help us to identify with the first hearers of Mark who struggled for the courage to be faithful in the face of very difficult circumstances.

The purpose of Mark in its historical context

The purpose of Mark's gospel as inferred from a study of the standards of judgment fits well the generally accepted historical context of Mark's gospel. The Gospel of Mark was probably written during, or just after, the Roman-Jewish War of 66-70 CE. In that war, the Jewish nation revolted against the Roman overlords. The Romans defeated the Jews, conquering Jerusalem, and destroying the temple. Mark wrote about Jesus to show that any attempt to dominate others by force—either by Rome or by Israel—was contrary to the values God calls forth from people in the rule of God.

Mark's gospel announces that Jesus inaugurated God's rule, a realm that brings life rather than destruction, a realm that fosters service rather than domination. Jesus calls the disciples to announce this realm of God to the world. Mark's goal was nothing less than fostering this new world among all who would hear his gospel. Mark also believed that Jesus' return and the final establishment of God's kingdom were imminent. Mark therefore enjoined urgency and alertness in the mission of spreading the news of God's kingdom to all people and all the nations before the end came.

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It is generally accepted that Mark wrote to followers who risked persecution in their mission to be good news and to bring good news to the world. The time of the war was difficult for followers of Jesus. On the one hand, they were the target of persecution from other Jews, because they opposed the war. On the other hand, they were suspected by the Romans, because their leader had been executed as a revolutionary. They faced ridicule, rejection, ostracism from family and community, betrayal, arrests, trials, floggings, and death (13:5-23). It was a difficult time even to admit an association with Jesus, let alone proclaim the good news (14:66-72). Although followers of Jesus undoubtedly knew courage, they must often have failed to speak and act because of fear. Clearly this was a time of threat when people tend to resort to any means of self-preservation. Mark addressed this situation of persecution and fear, and he sought to reverse the drive to self-preservation. Mark's narrative led hearers to face the fear of loss and persecution and empowered them, in spite of oppression and destructiveness, to announce the good news and to spread the blessings of the kingdom of God faithfully and courageously.⁵

4. The phrase is from Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (Herder & Herder, 1994). Mark is anti-patriarchal. Disciples leave fathers, but they do not gain them in the new community.

5. This essay is only one way to understand the purpose of Mark, based on the use of narrative criticism. For further discussion of variety in perspective and method, see *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Fortress, 2008). On narrative criticism, see Mark A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Fortress, 1991).