

Listen to Jesus: A Mountaintop Instruction from the Creator of Heaven & Earth - A.H. Mathias Zahniser

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

The sermon was immediately preceded by the following litany led by several children.

### A Litany for Transfiguration Sunday

*This is my own dear Son—listen to him!* (Mark 9:7b GNT)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lie down and rest.”** (Luke 9:58 GNT)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”** (Matthew 8:22 NRSV)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”** (Mark 10:14 GNT)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.”**  
(Mark 10:21 GNT)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“Do not fear, only believe.”** (Mark 5:36b NRSV)

Children: **Jesus said,**

Congregation: **“Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.”** (Matthew 8:13a NRSV)

The Goodnews New Testament (GNT). United Bible Societies, 2005.

New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV). National Council of Churches of Christ, 1989.

The children have guided our litany of statements from Jesus. Let their voices ring in our ears as we visit the Transfiguration of Jesus. After all,

**Jesus said:** *Let the . . . children come to me; and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs* (Mark 10: 14 NRSV).

Just six days before the Transfiguration, which is the lesson for today, Jesus had asked his disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* They report, *John the Baptist; . . . Elijah; . . . one of the prophets.* Then Peter gets an A for rightly identifying Jesus as the Christ, Messiah, the anointed one, or coming King of Israel. Jesus follows up by describing his mission:

**Jesus said:** *... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again* (Mark 8:31 NRSV).

Whoa! What?! Peter immediately earns an F by rebuking Jesus as though he (Peter) had a better career in mind for a King! Peter’s scold apparently reminds Jesus of his temptation in the wilderness, leading him to voice his disappointment:

**Jesus said:** *Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things* (Mark 8:33 NRSV).

Then Jesus does another startling move. He calls a crowd to join his disciples and invites them to a career much like his:

**Jesus said:** *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?* (Mark 8:34-37 NRSV)

Now remember, this crowd had not gone to daily Vacation Bible School as children. The cross meant something grossly awesome to them. Hey! Is this going to attract disciples? Probably not, if the crowd, like Peter, is thinking only on human things! And frankly, that's the problem Jesus' career summary is designed to deal with. Human thinking is not divine thinking. Jesus' death will be made necessary precisely because he is devoted to divine thinking and willing to take on (that is, challenge and disobey) the dominant human thinking of his time and place!

From chapter 8, verse 27, through chapter 10, verse 45, Jesus takes his twelve disciples on a journey from Caesarea Philippi in the north, through Galilee, and to Judea in the south. On this pilgrimage he makes a similar prediction, of how his career will work out, in each of the three regions. In spite of this three-time repetition of Jesus' career according to divine thinking, in spite of healings and exorcisms along the way, in spite of the Transfiguration event itself, and in spite of the disciples' correct knowledge of who Jesus is, the Twelve do not really listen to him; they cannot bear to. It turned out to be possibly the least successful COR 102 trip or class field trip in history. Human thinking changes very slowly. Change it to: divine thinking is very dangerous.

Now back to the gospel reading.

On the mountain Jesus is transformed in front of the very eyes of the staggered Peter, James, and John. It is as though this transfixed trio had a sneak preview of the resurrected Jesus, to help them understand how his mission would end.

Two resurrected ancients, Elijah, the rugged, charismatic and exemplary prophet, along with Moses, the law-giver and teacher, appear with him.

This inspires Peter—thinking perhaps about becoming a college president—to suggest an impromptu building program. But before they could scurry together the shrine, a cloud overshadows them. We readers know whose voice speaks from the cloud. It is none other than the LORD who is king; let the peoples tremble! Who sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The mighty King and lover of justice! (Psalm 99:1-4)

So what does this mighty LORD before whom the peoples tremble, before whom the earth quakes, this lover of justice who works righteousness, what does this mighty Creator, Revealer, and Redeemer say from this cloud? I will repeat what the Creator of heaven and earth said:

*This is my Son, the Beloved; LISTEN TO HIM!* (Mark 9:7b NRSV)

No dictated commandments, no instructions about worship, no clues to the meaning of life, just an identification of his dear Son and a command, ***Listen to him!*** This is all the mighty God has to say.

*When the disciples looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, BUT ONLY JESUS* (Mark 9:8 NRSV).

Jesus is all the community of his followers needs: a prophet, but more than a prophet, a teacher, but more than a teacher, a king, but more than a king, a savior, but more than a savior. They are

left with a person **participating in the very identity of God—God’s Son**. This is assured by the voice from the cloud, *This is my beloved Son! LISTEN TO HIM*.

Now I cannot in the time I have go over the whole of that Servant Shock (Mark 10:45) Pilgrimage with Jesus and his half-blind disciples (Mark 8:22-26 // 10:46-52). So I am going to focus on chapter 10 to help you listen—or as Pastor Judy stressed a couple of Sundays back—to help you pay attention. As you know, attention, really listening to the point of understanding and trying to obey, is costly.

Mark devotes the first section of chapter ten’s portion of the journey to Jesus’ teaching about divorce. Jesus’ divine thinking appears to be very harsh and to rule out divorce. He claims that what Moses commanded, that a man should write a certificate of dismissal if he wanted a divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), was a temporary compromise due to Israelite hard-heartedness. Jesus roots divine thinking in Genesis (Genesis 1: 27; and 5: 2):

*Jesus said: [F]rom the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (Mark 10: 5-9 NRSV).*

When “at home” his disciples asked him again about this matter;

*Jesus said: Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery (Mark 10:10-12 NRSV).*

Note that, in this scenario, women enter the picture as equal actors with men in the case of divorce. Although both the Roman tradition and the Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus allowed women to separate from their husbands under some circumstances, divorce was primarily just a man’s prerogative, to the extent that neither the Romans nor the Jews used the same term for a man’s divorce and woman’s divorce.<sup>1</sup> (Collins 2007:458-70; HCSB n. 10:12). Jesus’ divine thinking includes the full equality of men and women—even in the case of divorce.

But there is even more to divine thinking on this matter. Let’s go back and look at what Jesus said earlier in Mark’s gospel to a man. First let’s go to chapter 2.

You will remember the story (Mark 2:1-12): Jesus is “speaking the word” in Capernaum to a crowd that fills the house where he is staying; even the doorway was so jammed with listeners that, when a group comes carrying a paralyzed companion, their only hope of access to Jesus is to lower the paralytic through the roof, which they do. (It is good to have friends. You might say he was a lucky stiff.)

*Jesus said: Son, your sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5b NRSV).*

Notice that he calls him “son.” He is made a member of the family of Jesus, what I will later refer to as “the one-hundred fold family” (Mark 10:29-30). Jesus went on to heal him even

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<sup>1</sup> Clifton Black and Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Gospel According to Mark” (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2006), 1743, n. Mark 10:12.

though it was the Sabbath. **Jesus puts human need before even valid practice.**<sup>2</sup> According to divine thinking implemented by Jesus he was a member of the family of God, deserving healing and the love of faith-full friends.

More closely related to the women-centered teaching about divorce is the story where:

*Jesus said: Daughter, your faith has made you well* (Mark 5:34 NRSV).

Mark loves interruptions. Many of his stories are sandwiches like this one. And the sandwich adds force to this healing which is the meat between the bread of the **raising of a child from death!**

One of the leaders of the synagogue falls at Jesus' feet when Jesus is surrounded by a *great crowd* and begs Jesus repeatedly, *My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.* So Jesus, followed by the whole entourage, went with this Jewish leader. But the whole life-saving caravan is interrupted by a woman who has had a chronic hemorrhage for twelve years. She has exhausted all healing resources and is desperate. She is also ritually unclean because of the flow of blood which will not stop. In spite of her uncleanness, making her like a leper in that culture, secretly she touches Jesus' garment. Mark tells us that not only is she healed *immediately* (his favorite word), but Jesus *immediately*—there's the word again—senses that power has gone out from him and asks, *Who touched my clothes?* Oh, oh! The unclean woman has been discovered, the haste to the bed of the dying daughter of the Jewish leader is delayed, and what will happen now? The woman comes forward in fear and trembling, falls down before Jesus and tells him the whole story. How does Jesus answer the trembling and repentant violator of the laws of impurity in front of a large crowd, including a synagogue leader?

*Jesus said: Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease* (Mark 5:34 NRSV).

He takes this trembling woman into the 100-fold family!

Meanwhile the daughter of the dignitary dies. But Jesus goes on to see the daughter; while challenging her father, *Jesus said: Do not fear, only believe.* Jesus, knowing she is sleeping, takes her parents with him to this preteen (born the very year the interrupting woman's hemorrhaging began), takes her by the hand and says, *Little girl, get up!* And *immediately*—that word again—she begins to walk about. The family of God includes children as well as adults. Indeed Jesus once uttered this bit of divine thinking:

*Jesus said: Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother* (Mark 3:35 NRSV).

Next, in Mark 10, Jesus blesses the little children. People were bringing little children to him whom the disciples, following local human thinking, were shooing away. Along with the Roman culture, the Israelite culture of Jesus' time was a children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard culture.

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<sup>2</sup> It would seem that this principle would also fit in with Jesus' improvement of the biblical perspective on divorce mentioned above. It would seem to allow a divorce when it was clearly better for both individuals involved than staying together, but clearly as a last resort, not just when the man wished to divorce or just when the woman wished to divorce.

Joel Green, a New Testament scholar, and Mark Baker, a mission theologian, put it succinctly: children were “the least impressive inhabitants of the Roman social world.”<sup>3</sup> (2000:41)

**Jesus said:** *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it* (Mark 10:14-15 NRSV).

According to Jesus, divine thinking involves appreciating children. We should look for opportunities such as the Simple Room to implement this. I never would have guessed that having children collect the offering would be such a glorious experiment in ushering. Indeed, we are ushering in a new era in ushering. With this and our Godly Play program we are tapping into Jesus’s divine thinking. But here is some staggering information: “For the first time in 50 years, a majority of U.S. public school students come from low-income families.” The initial endowments of these children put them behind their peers even before they get to school. Divine thinking would seem to support the President’s “call to fund preschool for low-income families.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus also challenges human thinking in his culture, and ours, about wealth.

**Jesus said:** *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* (Mark 10:23 NRSV)

This statement of Jesus’ is one of the most revolutionary bits of divine thinking in the whole Bible. It comes at the end of the next episode in Mark 10. A rich man comes to Jesus and humbly asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus lists six commandments for the man. Only *Do not defraud* is not among the Ten Commandments of Exodus (20:1-17) and Deuteronomy (5:6-21), explicitly. But it is implied in the commands not to steal, which is on Jesus’ list, and not to covet, which is conspicuous for its absence from Jesus’ list. Jesus mentions the fourth commandment, *Honor your father and mother*, last among the six he lists.

When the rich man answers, *Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth*, Jesus looked at him in love. J. Ramsey Michaels, from nearby Southwest Missouri State University, says that Jesus probably embraces the man for his obedience, then extends to him an invitation, not a commandment.<sup>5</sup>

**Jesus said:** *You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me* (Mark 10:21 NRSV).

Unfortunately the dear soul goes away sorrowful, obviously disappointed that he could not lay his wealth at Jesus’ feet.

Like the way they are listed in Exodus 20 (but for *Honor your father and mother*), those of the Ten Commandments that Jesus listed are clustered together without further comment: ‘don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t bear false witness; don’t defraud.’ Notable for

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<sup>3</sup> Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Lyndsey Layton, Washington Post, published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 17, 2015, A 14.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “Commandments,” In Joel B. Green and Scott McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 133.

its absence from this cluster of five is ‘don’t covet’. Could Jesus have determined that this man was a coveter, whose wealth was his prison? That is not certain. However, scientific studies of the wealthy have multiplied recently. One study found that drivers of expensive cars were four times as likely to cut in front of other drivers as were drivers of cheap cars. Another, surveying 43,000 Americans, found to their surprise that the wealthy were more likely to shoplift than the poor. Another study found that people with incomes below 25 thousand a year gave away an average of 4.7% of their income, while those earning 150 thousand a year gave away only 2.7%.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus of course was not teaching that every disciple has to give away all his money, because in other contexts he commends those who give half their money to the poor (Luke 19:2-8) and who manage their money and have money to give to people who fall into difficulty (Luke 10:30-37). The point is that in God’s thinking the people with greatest need have priority over those who are adequately supplied, and his followers should give generously and share. People who cannot do that will be among last though they are now among the first.

This seeming put-down of the rich man disturbs the disciples of Jesus, who ask, in essence, how this man cannot be saved since his wealth indicates he is righteous (see Psalm 1:1-3, with its, ‘Happy are the righteous, they shall prosper in everything they do!’). So they remind Jesus that they have left all to follow him. Jesus then tells them what they gain for what they have left. This is what I call ‘the 100-fold family’.

I have inserted into your worship folder a slip of paper with a table showing verses 28-34 of Mark, chapter 10, where the life of his church is shown parallel with the messianic career of Jesus. It is mostly a statement of Jesus’. I will end with it. You have the structure, showing that the career of the church, the **100-fold family** parallels closely the career of the Messiah, King, Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, <i>we</i> have left everything and <i>FOLLOWED</i> you.” <sup>29</sup> <b>Jesus said</b> , “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields,			
with	PERSECUTIONS,	<b><i>and in the age to come</i></b>	ETERNAL LIFE.”
<sup>31</sup> Many and	FIRST the LAST	will be	LAST, FIRST.”
<sup>32</sup> They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who <i>FOLLOWED</i> were afraid. He took <b><i>the twelve</i></b> aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, <sup>33</sup> saying, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; <sup>34</sup> they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him,			
they	will KILL (him);	<b><i>and after three days</i></b>	HE WILL RISE.”

Mark 10:28-34 Adapted from NRSV. Roland Meynet, *A New Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (2010:273)

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lewis, “What Wealth Does to your Soul,” *The Week*, 12/31/14, 32-33; excerpted with permission from an article published in *The New Republic*, no further citation given)

We all can be members of this 100-fold family. Let us listen to Jesus and learn to think along the lines of the thinking of the Maker of heaven and earth, and of his Son, Jesus Christ, assisted by the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with the communion of saints.