

**Scandalous Grace**  
**Mark 2:13-17**  
**ABC 3/20/22**

Believe it or not, it's that time of the year again. In just 26 days April 15<sup>th</sup> will be here. Which reminds me, I haven't filed my taxes yet. Why do we pay taxes? So the government can spend it, right? The national budget for 2022 is 6.011 trillion dollars. I assume that's a lot of money but I can't wrap my head around it. Imagine it this way: If you began at the birth of Jesus & spent \$8+ million/day, every day, without time off for weekends or holidays, & continued spending at that rate through the destruction of Jerusalem, the fall of Rome, the Dark Ages, the Middle ages, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, right on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century until today, you would have just now spent 6.011 trillion dollars. This year our government is spending more than \$190,000/second, about \$11.5 million/minute, or almost \$685 million/hour. Can you imagine? Think of the effort it takes to spend that much money! Better yet, think of the effort it takes to collect this much money from you & me! Now, go home & pay your taxes! No, this isn't a political sermon, simply an introduction to our passage in Mk 2. However necessary taxes are, none of us like to pay them. Incomprehensible tax laws, forms, & the IRS bring stress to many. I don't know if it's any consolation, but it's been this way for at least the last 2,000 years. In Jesus' day, the Romans collected taxes through a system called *tax farming*. They assessed a district a fixed tax figure & then sold the right to collect the taxes to the highest bidder. The winning bidder had to hand over that amount at the end of the year but could keep whatever he collected above that. Obviously, there was a huge potential for extortion & corruption. Tax gatherers could stop anyone & tax them for just about anything. They were extortionists & the scum of society. So rare was honesty in the profession that a Roman writer once said he saw a monument to an honest tax collector!<sup>1</sup> Jewish tax collectors gave up their national identity, their social status, their membership in the synagogue, were disowned by their families, & anyone who befriended a tax collector was considered unclean.<sup>2</sup> Let's read the passage & then get into it. **Mk 2:13-17**

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, pp 61-62

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Mark*, First Edition, St. Andrew's Expository Commentary, p 45

We find ourselves in a section of Mark where there is a series of encounters between the religious elite & Jesus. They reveal a growing rift between them & the reasons for it. Jesus claiming to have the authority to forgive sins offended them & now, as we'll see, so did His association with people they regarded as unworthy & unclean. Mark is presenting Jesus & His message as being one you can't be neutral toward. Jesus has made outrageous claims. Either He's the Son of God who is the Messiah & has the power to forgive sin or He's a liar & blasphemer. The scribes & Pharisees begin to follow Him around trying to trap Him. This will eventually lead to His trial & execution. We see a familiar pattern here. Jesus withdraws from the city & its crowds, walking along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. But, as always, the crowd finds Him. & when they do, Jesus teaches them. **13**

**1. His Custom** It was Jesus' custom to teach. What did He teach? According to Mk 1:14-15, He was **preaching the gospel of God, & saying, "The time is fulfilled, & the kingdom of God is at hand; repent & believe in the gospel."** Jesus is walking on the shore of the Sea of Galilee & crowds were **coming to Him** & listening to Him as He taught them.

**2. His Call** As He does this, He issues a call for someone to follow Him. **14**

Jewish tax collectors were easily the most hated people in Jewish society. They were despicable, traitorous vermin who worked for the Roman occupiers & who took advantage of their fellow Jews. Jewish tradition prohibited receiving alms from a tax collector since the money was presumed to have been gained illegally. The Talmud says, *It is righteous to lie & deceive a tax collector.* Hear me right. The Bible does NOT say that. That's the Talmud, the Jewish commentary on civil & ceremonial law. We can't appreciate Jesus' calling of Levi if we don't understand the common hatred of tax collectors. It was absolutely scandalous when Jesus walked up to Levi & said, **Follow Me.** It was unthinkable that He, a good Jewish rabbi, would select a tax collector to be part of His band of disciples. & yet He goes to Levi & speaks to him. Jesus' words must have sent shockwaves through the crowd. No reputable rabbi would speak nicely to a tax collector. Self-respecting Jewish people would never want a tax collector as an associate or follower. But Jesus shattered all the stereotypes. In Mark & Luke's accounts he's called Levi. If you go to Matthew's account, he's called Matthew. There are several people in the Bible with 2 names: Saul & Paul, Simon & Peter, Levi &

Matthew. Jesus goes to Levi & says, **Follow Me!** Notice the choice was entirely that of Jesus. The whole initiative was His. He left the crowd & came searching for a lost sheep by the name of Levi. He found him, approached him, & told him, **Follow Me!** Levi didn't apply for this position. Remember the time in the Upper Room where Jesus spoke to His disciples about the sovereignty of His choice & said, **You did not choose Me but I chose you, & appointed you that you would go & bear fruit** (Jn 15:16)? If you & I were going to choose 12 people to spread the gospel to all the world, few of us would've had Levi on our short list. There's something powerful when Jesus looks at this despicable man who stands for everything that's opposite of what Jesus is & Jesus sees potential. Jesus didn't see innate potential or goodness in Levi because he has none. What Jesus sees is the radical, transforming, life-altering, potential of God's grace. Jesus sought out someone no one else wanted & that everyone wished would fall under the wrath & judgment of God. This was a trademark of Jesus. Jesus saw in the sinful life of Levi, a Matthew, an apostle, writer, & evangelist. He still sees people the same way. It's interesting that in his gospel, the only reference to Matthew is in the list of the disciples. & he's given a nickname, **Matthew the tax collector** (10:3). No one else is listed by their job. Matthew is saying, *I'm just a sinner. That's all I am. I was an outcast, a pariah. & Jesus called me into union & fellowship & communion with Him.* How did Levi respond? Jesus **said to him, "Follow Me!" & he got up & followed Him.** Lk adds that **he left everything behind, & got up & began to follow Him** (5:28). Levi must have been as shocked as those in the crowd who witnessed this invitation. Undoubtedly, Levi knew who Jesus was. But what he knew about Jesus paled in comparison to what Jesus knew about him. Jesus saw an outcast who was wretched & miserable, deeply distressed by the weight of his guilt & ready to repent. That **Levi** was the very kind of person whom Jesus had come to save became apparent when he didn't hesitate to obey Jesus' call.<sup>3</sup> Like Peter, Andrew, James, & John, it was a decisive act. He gave up everything & there was no going back. The 2 sets of brothers could go back to fishing but Levi, once he left his tax collecting, could never go back. What kind of people does God use? He uses vile, wretched, rotten sinners. He uses people like Levi. He became 1 of the Apostles & writes one of the gospels. God is in the restoration

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 116

business. He restores the fallen, the disenfranchised, the despised, the social pariahs, & He uses them for His glory. Isn't that a wonderful thing? & He's still doing it. In contrast to the rich young ruler, who chose riches over eternal life (Mk 10:21-22), Levi left his tax booth & the fortune it made him so he could follow Jesus. The former extortionist, traitor, & outcast was transformed into a disciple. Though he lost a career, he gained an eternal reward & an **inheritance which is imperishable & undefiled & will not fade away, reserved in heaven** (1 Pt 1:4). Levi may have been banned from the synagogue, but he was accepted by God & given salvation. Again, we see the power of God's grace. The reason we're sometimes surprised at Jesus calling people like Levi is because we wrongly think we're different. We think we're somehow better than him. & yet we're all as capable of everything Levi was & did, apart from the transforming operation of God's grace. Our only hope is God's grace. We bring nothing to the equation but deep personal need. That's the heart of the gospel. Each of us is Levi. & it's shocking that God called any of us. But by His grace, He does. Jesus is still reaching out to sinners today. He reached out to you. He reached out to me. & He's still reaching out to those who are dead in their sins. Grace gives Levi the ability to respond in this moment. Grace opens his eyes. Grace moves his heart. Grace changes his thinking. Grace changes his desires, & Levi follows Jesus. What an amazing thing! & this is our story too. It's not that you're smart, holy, have the right desires, & know your theology. None of that will save you. You've been rescued from yourself & your sin by God's grace! How do you respond to that? How did Levi respond?

**3. His Communion** (15) A man like Levi wouldn't normally have a rabbi over. & a rabbi wouldn't attend a dinner party thrown by a tax collector. **15**

Who's house is this party at? Is this Jesus' house? Levi's house? Luke makes it clear when he writes, **Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house...** (5:29). The fact that Levi wants Jesus to come to his home is an amazing thing. Even more amazing is that Jesus did so. Sharing a meal together was a statement of acceptance & friendship. It's clear Levi wants to celebrate his new found Messiah & wants to introduce his friends & co-workers to Jesus. This is the natural response of the soul that's received God's grace. Luke says it was **a big reception** (5:29) & Mark says **many** were

there. They were all spending time together. It's not a fast food dinner. It's reclining, relaxing, conversing with **many tax collectors & sinners**. Jesus is sharing a meal, spending time with these sinful people. Who are Levi's friends? Social pariahs like Levi. We've talked about tax-collectors. It's natural they'd all be friends because no one else liked them. **Sinners** was a technical term for people the Pharisees felt were inferior because they didn't follow religious tradition as closely as the religious elite. They were thought of as outsiders who knowingly broke God's law. They were despised & hated. & yet here was Jesus & His disciples dining & talking with these dregs of society. & Jesus is comfortable here. These are the people He came for. Jesus is willing to eat with them & be seen with them. They are the reason that brought Him to earth & they are the reason He'll go to the cross. Mark explains that **there were many of them, & they were following Him**. Levi's conversion was one of many who believed in Jesus that day. Like Levi, they lived on the fringes. But by God's grace, they were transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

**4. His Controversy** (16-17) This was all too much for the scribes & Pharisees. They prided themselves in how good they were & set themselves apart on the high moral ground because they weren't like any of these people eating with Jesus. They were committed to the Law as they saw it. Holding tightly to the belief that they were righteous, they denied their need for a Savior & then rejected the Messiah. By contrast, the gospel message is for those who recognize & admit they aren't righteous. **16**

In their eyes it was disgraceful for Jesus to disregard their rules & eat with **tax collectors & sinners**. From their perspective, these people represented the dregs of society. From Jesus' viewpoint, they were the mission field. Luke tells us the Pharisees are **grumbling** when they ask this question. This isn't merely curiosity. This is them **grumbling**, saying, *Who does He think He is? How dare He go into this house with sinners to eat?* They want to know why Jesus eats with *those people*, which is an arrogant question. The only way you can ask that question is if you've concluded you're not one of them. You'd never ask that if you'd say to yourself, *Maybe I haven't done what these people did but I've done just as bad, if not worse. I have nothing to bring before God that would achieve acceptance with Him.* In fact, you could argue that religious leaders should be saying, *This is what*

*the Messiah was called to do. He's the light of the world. He's here to give sight to blind eyes. He's here to raise the dead to life. What a beautiful thing that He would seek & save people such as these!* But that's not their response. Instead it's, *How dare He eat with people like this?* The Pharisees were strongly committed to keeping the law of God, as they interpreted it, & they believed that salvation came from distancing themselves from anyone who was morally suspect. It was important for them, in order to maintain their *holiness & righteousness*, to have no dealings with people they regarded as **sinners**. They were counting on themselves doing the right things & God approving them as a result. Before you get down on them, realize there are Christians just like that. They believe there's some sanctity in avoiding any contact with unbelievers. In other words, scribes & Pharisees still exist in Christian churches today. Maybe not philosophically or theologically but certainly practically. There's a universal problem with self-righteousness, then & now. Before you immediately start thinking of someone you think is self-righteous, look at yourself. We're all skilled at comparing ourselves to others & seeing ourselves as being much better. We're all too comfortable in our condemnation of others who are such sinners. Dare I say it? Some of us are Pharisees. We elevate ourselves on our high moral ground & look down at the rest of the world. *I'm staying far away. I'm on my pedestal, doing everything right, being pure, & separate from them.* That's the Pharisees, &, unfortunately, that's some of us, & it's wrong. Let me put it this way: Who would make you uncomfortable if they walked in the door & plopped down next to you in the pew? Be honest. What class of person would you rather not see come to ABC & be saved? This is an important question to consider because Jesus hung out with sinners. If Jesus didn't eat with sinners, He'd be eating forever alone. This passage brings to our attention our struggle with self-righteousness & thinking more highly of ourselves than others.

History records that when Oliver Cromwell ruled England, the nation experienced a crisis & ran out of silver & couldn't mint any coins. Cromwell sent his soldiers to the Cathedral to see if any silver was available. They reported back that the only silver was the statues of the saints, to which Cromwell replied, *Melt down the saints & get them back into circulation.* Sometimes God must do that with us. We must be melted down so we'll get back into circulation in the world for Him.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Preaching*, Volume 1, Number 4, January/February 1986, p. 55.

All too often we arrange our lives so we're with non-believers as little as possible. We need to reach out to the people who are lost around us & extend ourselves to interact with them so that they might meet Jesus.

Anyway, the Pharisees are scandalized. So, courageous men that they were, they approached Jesus' disciples, & asked, **why is He eating & drinking with tax collectors & sinners?** (16). As we saw with the paralytic they have a problem with Jesus. They kept it to themselves but Jesus knew what they were thinking. In this passage, they actually speak up, but not directly to Jesus. **17**

When His disciples told Him what the critics were saying, Jesus responded in 2 parts. 1<sup>st</sup> He said, **It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick** (17). This was a common proverb. When we're sick we go to a doctor. When we're healthy, we don't say, *I'm feeling so good, I think I should see the doctor.* Jesus came for those who are sick. 2<sup>nd</sup>, Jesus completed His answer with a statement of His overall purpose: **I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners** (17). The religious claimed to be holy, but were only superficially moral. Their righteousness wasn't the result of God transforming them but was an external righteousness consisting of nothing more than rule keeping & outward show. They expected Jesus & His disciples to observe their legalistic & extra-biblical regulations. When He didn't, they reacted with anger & resentment. Jesus says, **I did not come to call the righteous.** In one sense, He **did not come to call the righteous** because there aren't any who are righteous. We understand the teaching of Scripture, that **there is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God, all have turned aside... there is none who does good, there is not even one** (Rom 3:10-12). In that sense, Jesus didn't come for those people, because they don't exist. In another sense, He didn't come for those who think they're righteous because of what they do & don't do. They think they have it all together. They think they're fine. They're the healthy people that don't need to go to doctors. Jesus says He didn't come for those people because they don't even recognize they have a need, they're self-righteous. The implication was that these religious leaders themselves needed to repent of their sin. They were the sickest of the sick, all the while thinking they had no need of a physician. We learn from Luke's account, Jesus said, **I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance** (5:32).

Jesus had a mission, a goal in interacting with these people. They needed to hear His message. Jesus sits & eats with the despised, the rejected, & the seemingly spiritual hopeless because that's what He came to do. He's there because He understands He is their only hope. He won't just number Himself with sinners in His life, He'll also number Himself with sinners in His death. He'll hang as a criminal next to criminals, taking our sin upon Him so that we'll be forgiven. As the hymn says, *Not the righteous, not the righteous, sinners Jesus came to call.*<sup>5</sup> It doesn't matter how much of an outcast you think they are, it doesn't matter how sinful you think they are, they needed the healing message of the gospel. Jesus came with the purpose of interacting with these people. As we know, the Pharisees were just as needy as the tax collectors & sinners, but tragically they didn't know it. Jesus was saying, *To people who think they're righteous, I have nothing to say. But to those who know they have need, I am the answer. I came to call sinners.* Therefore, the person who says, *there's no significant sin in me*, is beyond help. All we can do is wait for God's grace to draw them to Himself. Sooner or later life will go sour, their dreams will collapse, & they'll know their need. That is why God often allows trouble to come, to strip away the delusion that we can make it by ourselves & thus turn to God & His grace.<sup>6</sup>

There are 2 equally fatal problems with the Pharisees salvation-by-works theology. The 1<sup>st</sup> is that everyone's behavior is sinful & displeasing to God. Jesus reached out & accepted those the Pharisees thought unclean & unworthy. The Pharisees had made sin manageable by codifying degrees of sins, conscious or unconscious, greater or lesser. The important thing became not to commit the greater sins. Then they set over against their sin the counter-weight of human merit. Merits were thought to compensate for sins; you could pile up enough merits to balance your sins. In this way sin became manageable, not the deadly poison the Bible says it is. Every honest person knows they're sinful. The Pharisees didn't deny the reality of sin but they didn't regard it as an insurmountable problem. It was something they thought they knew how to manage quite well. & in that they were like most people then & now. They didn't see themselves as, by nature, enemies

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Hart, *Come, Ye Sinners*

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 72.



of God & in desperate need of His forgiveness. Their religion didn't major on God's grace, on the reality of forgiveness to the utterly undeserving, or on salvation as entirely God's intervention on behalf of the helpless. People who see sin for what it really is see themselves as terrible sinners & don't call other people *sinners* as if they themselves were not. It's not as if Christians think others are sinners & we are not. We're all sinners. I'm not saying that becoming a Christian doesn't change a person's behavior for the better, it does. But as the Bible says, & as our experience confirms, becoming & being a Christian doesn't make as much of a difference in our behavior as we wish it did. Our behavior remains more like unbelievers than it does Jesus' perfect behavior. The great difference lies not being rid of our sin but in our admission of it. It's the honest admission & confession of sin, & the realization that everything depends upon God's willingness to forgive & save us. That's what makes a Christian. No other religion brings this message. No other faith or philosophy begins with the declaration that you are lost & that only God can save you. Sin is what sends men to hell. Sin is what destroys them forever. Sin isn't just a minor blemish. It's a terminal disease that's taken control of the entire life of a human being, spreading its poison to the thoughts, words, & actions. Before God man stands utterly condemned &, absent an honest admission of his guilt, such as Levi must have made, man remains arrogant, proud, & disdainful of the holy & righteous God. Sin's worst effect is that it blinds people to itself. It makes people proud who ought to be desperately ashamed. Salvation is **for sinners**. Until you see yourself as such a sinner, a tax collector in a time when everyone hated tax collectors, you aren't among those who will ever really hear the good news of salvation. The 2<sup>nd</sup> fatal problem with the moral theory of salvation is related to the 1<sup>st</sup>. God has met our greatest need by sending His Son to suffer & die for our sins. To ignore this is to despise the incomparably great thing God has done for us. The Pharisees weren't looking for a Savior from sin & death because they didn't think they needed one. Most people today aren't looking for a Redeemer because they don't think they're sinners who need to be saved. Most people think they can save themselves. By believing that they're despising God's great gift. The greatest crime a human can commit is to make nothing of Jesus when God has made Him everything. The weight of man's sin is too great for him to carry. It has to be carried

by Another & no one is capable of carrying it except God Himself, in the man Jesus Christ. Our salvation isn't a calculation of merits versus demerits. Salvation can't be earned through good works, personal merits, or any form of self-righteousness (Titus 3:5–7). Human achievement can't earn salvation, since even the best deeds of unredeemed sinners **are like a filthy garment** before a holy God (Is 64:6). Only God can provide forgiveness for sin & eternal life (Rom 1:16). What sinful human beings could never do through their own efforts, God did by sending His Son **as an offering for sin** (Rom 8:3). The gospel message centers on the truth that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures** (1 Cor 15:3), so **that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life** (Jn 3:16). Through His death on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for sin for all who believe in Him, so they might be reconciled to God. He who was entirely without sin became the bearer of sin **so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him** (2 Cor 5:21). Our sins were imputed to Christ on the cross, where He suffered for them as a substitutionary sacrifice (1 Pt 2:24). On the other hand, through faith, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, so we're declared righteous by God Himself (Rom 4:5–6; 5:19). Believers have been **justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus** (Rom 3:24). Thus, salvation is entirely **by grace ... through faith; & that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast** (Eph 2:8–9). It's a mysterious, wonderful, overwhelming event that God accomplished for us. It concerns a bridegroom laying down His life to win life & freedom for His bride. It concerns a mighty love acting at great sacrifice to secure the eternal life of a people He loves. Salvation is something that happened in the world, at the cross & is proved by the empty tomb. The salvation of a sinner is a tremendous thing & cost nothing less than the crucifixion of the Son of God. God help us to have a biblically accurate view of ourselves. Not a view of ourselves that causes us to beat ourselves up because if you're beating yourself up, you're still holding onto self-righteousness. You're still trying to be righteous in & of yourself. May God fill us with a profound sense of need that forces us to the cross where we find forgiveness & now can worship our Redeemer whose grace is our only hope. Here we see His mercy & compassion towards not just the average person, but even these sinful tax collectors. Mt 9:13 gives us a little bit more. Jesus says, **Go & learn what**

**this means, 'I desire compassion, & not sacrifice.** The phrase **go & learn** was a rabbinic expression used to rebuke foolish ignorance.<sup>7</sup> Jesus says, *You Pharisees need a quick lesson. You think you're so smart & have it all figured out. You need to learn what God said in Hosea 6:6; I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, I desire mercy, not your sacrifice of setting yourself apart from the world & remaining on your high horse, that means nothing to Me.* God is more concerned with a merciful heart than with the hard, hypocritical observance of external acts. Cold-hearted legalism may look holy on the outside. But it doesn't please God who weighs thoughts & motives. In their unwillingness to show mercy to others, the Pharisees betrayed the corruption of their stony hearts. Though they claimed to keep the law, Jesus' use of Hosea 6:6 exposed their failure to do so. They prided themselves on observing the letter of the law. In their minds, they were holy. In reality, they were more lost than tax collectors who knew they were rejected by God. Jesus throws it in their face, saying, *I'm doing exactly what God would do because I am God.* He's showing His mercy & compassion, even on people so loathed & hated by the Pharisees.

God seeks those who, recognizing their sinfulness, cry out for mercy & depend fully on His grace. By contrast, the Pharisees were so far from God that, although they could identify other people as sinners, they were unable to recognize their own miserable condition. Whereas the religious leaders had no mercy on those they regarded as less holy than themselves, Jesus extended God's grace to all who sincerely sought it in faith. Because they thought they were righteous, the Pharisees refused to show compassion toward others. Because He truly is righteous, Jesus graciously demonstrated the mercy & love of God toward sinners. Our merciful Great Physician extended forgiveness to repentant sinners & welcomed them into His kingdom. He still does so today (2 Cor 6:2). With Jesus, where sin abounds, grace abounds much more. Jesus & His followers didn't, & still must not, isolate themselves from a needy world, nor did they assimilate into it. They went with Christ to sinners. The Christian's life isn't to be one of *isolation*, nor *assimilation*, but

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<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 1-8*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 120

*mission.* Jesus sat down, & still sits down, with sinners. He dined with them & they with Him. & He met their need.<sup>8</sup>

Are we merciful in the way Jesus was? Do we have this heart for everyone? Or are we Pharisees? Do we take the self-righteous high ground & say, *When you aren't such a sinner I'll think about spending time & sharing the gospel with you?* That's such an arrogant place to be. We expect others to clean themselves up before we speak to them. That's not Jesus. He's going to them. We too must go to those around us. What kind of people does God use? Stained-glass saints? No, He uses vile, wretched, rotten sinners whom He has redeemed. He uses people like Levi, like you & me. God is in the restoration business. He restores the fallen, the disenfranchised, the despised, the social pariahs, & He uses them for His glory.

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<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 1, Preaching the Word, p 72