

## **Consequences**

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

In 1962 The Chiffons recorded He's So Fine, written by Ronnie Mack. It went to number one on the Billboard charts, the first song by an African-American “girl group” to make it to the top. In 1970 George Harrison wrote and recorded the song My Sweet Lord. It is essentially the same song with different lyrics as He's So Fine. Ronnie Mack and the Chiffons noticed. They sued Harrison for plagiarism. He argued that he had not intentionally stolen the tune. He had learned it on his guitar “as a lad”, as he told the judge, but had forgotten it until the day it came out of his pencil. But My Sweet Lord was and is such a perfect match for He's So Fine the plagiarism—intentional or not—cost Harrison \$587,000 in 1973 dollars.

Getting caught plagiarizing has consequences. In 2009 President Barak Obama told Republicans protesting his policies, “Elections have consequences.” We are seeing the truth of that today, as well. Actions have consequences. Inactions have consequences. Consequences are a central actor in the drama biblical scholars call “salvation history”. Moses spoke the words we read today in Deuteronomy. They come from an extended address the book pictures him giving near the end of his life. Here he tells them the Lord has revealed that another prophet will arise from among them. This prophet will, like Moses, draw on the presence of the Lord to learn what to tell the people. This will put a burden on that prophet. He will have to speak the Word

of the Lord accurately or face the consequences.

“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak,” Moses reports the Lord told him, “or who speaks in the names of other gods, that same prophet will surely die.” This prophet will be the Lord’s chosen instrument to lead the people of God into the Promised Land. This prophet will preside over events by which the Lord will fulfill the promises of the covenant made with Moses. But this prophet will have to toe the line very, very carefully. No mistakes. No words from other gods.

Whether the “prophet to come” was Joshua, who led the Israelites into Israel, or Elijah or Elisha, or any of a list of candidates, the most useful thing we can do is to contrast him with Jesus. The prophets of old fought a losing battle to keep the Israelites faithful to the covenant, to save themselves. Jesus offers salvation to all who call on his name. The salvation he makes possible is accessible and permanent.

Yet if our access to the blessings of the covenant comes through Jesus, consequences do remain. When we study the Old Testament covenants made with Abraham, Moses and David we tend to focus on the asset side of their ledgers. “I will be your God,” the Lord told them. “I will give you a land of your own and descendants more numerous than the grains of sand at the sea.” But we overlook a big two-letter word: *if*. “I will be your God *if* you will be my people,” is the formulation in its entirety. For the Hebrews being God’s people meant obeying the Law of God—including its

many ordinances found in Deuteronomy. And God made the consequence of disobedience quite clear. In their case, a disobedient prophet would die. In our case, obedience requires that we **believe** in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Disobedience, a lack of faith, brings death of a different kind.

The central point of Mark 1:21-28 is that Jesus has authority. The very word authority bookends the passage. Kenneth Bailey, the late, great scholar of Middle Eastern languages and religions, discovered a spacial technique used by ancient writers across the region. He found that when he paid attention to the appearance of passages on the page he could discern parallel points made at the first and last verses. These would express the most important thought in the whole passage. The next verses in and next to last would also make parallel points, and so on until you reached the center of the passage. There you would find an important but somewhat tangential point. Bailey, wrote of this middle point that, "It functioned rather like the bridge of a popular song, often in a different tempo or beat, yet somehow of a piece with the whole tune." After reading Bailey's Through the Eyes of the Apostle Paul, from which that quote comes, I taught a Bible study on I Corinthians, in which Paul used this technique again and again.

Mark 1:21-28 exemplifies this spacial writing. Verse 22 tells us Jesus, "taught them as one having authority". Verse 27: "...with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!" (This passage actually is a variation on Bailey's thesis. Other verses lie "outside" the authority verses, each of them giving us a

geographic update on Jesus' movements. These fit the parallel, spatial pattern, but do not contain especially important information.) Jesus' authority is the point. He teaches unlike any human teacher. He has power over spirits, even "unclean spirits". We will return to this thought in a moment, as it is in fact the most important in the passage. But first, we will note how the rest of the passage follows the spacial, parallel pattern.

The next verses in, 23 and 26, shine a spotlight on the unclean spirit. The author of the Gospel of Mark was a Jew. In Jewish thought of the day, a hierarchy of spirits inhabited the unseen world; some good, some evil, some engaged with the known world, others detached. One thing they all had in common: mere human beings had no power over them. Mark's reference to unclean spirits would have struck his readers as unremarkable. Every witness to Jesus' teaching and exorcism would have accepted it. The incredible thing to them was not the idea that such spirits might exist. It was, rather, that this local kid had authority over them. Which, again, is our central point to which we will return.

The remaining layer of parallelism in this passage is the middle, the bridge to the song. The latter part of verse 24 through verse 25 open with the unclean spirit saying, "...we know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" Here in its first chapter, the Gospel of Mark identifies Jesus of Nazareth as the Holy One of God, the Messiah promised by the prophets. But Jesus does not want word of his identity getting out just yet. He tells the unclean spirit to shut up, then orders it to depart. It does. The point here is

ancillary, almost a sidebar to this particular passage. But it is **the** most important point in all four Gospels. Jesus is God.

So finally we return to the point regarded most important in the context of Mark 1:21-28. Jesus, as God, has authority. He has authority over the seen and the unseen. He teaches like no mere mortal. He commands spirits. By implication he has authority over the Jews worshiping in the synagogue that day. By broader implication he has authority over us. Obeying him has consequences. Walking in his way helps us to stay close to him. It does not save us. Obedience does not earn us salvation and thank God. For which of us does not disobey? But our obedience and disobedience do have consequences.

In and of itself disobedience does not disqualify us from salvation. After all, the New Testament repeatedly tells us when we confess our sins (our disobedience), God forgives us. But disobedience does harden us. And it becomes a habit. Google search is the most-visited of all sites on the Internet. YouTube (a Google subsidiary) is second. The next fifteen to twenty most popular websites are all pornography. And according to statistics posted at Alexa Internet (an Amazon subsidiary), the people clicking on these sites are not all creepy older men. Teen boys and women 35-50 years of age also frequently hit that button.

Clearly the unclean spirits still have great influence over us. We must take this seriously not because our salvation is on the line but because our decisions have

consequences. They influence not only the direction our own walk with God takes, but often they impact others'. Obeying Jesus' authority therefore makes sense for us and for them. Here, then, are a couple of current hot spots, areas of contemporary life where our obedience to Jesus will influence our, and others', walks with him.

The debate over how to respond to the pandemic threatens to drive permanent wedges between people who otherwise would have every prospect of maintaining healthy, loving relationships. Only God knows what the future holds. Yet it does appear that the warp-speed arrival of vaccines promises relief and soon. As Jesus followers let us receive the Spiritual gift of patience that we might maintain the bonds of peace until we can all resume living with some semblance of normalcy.

The divide in our national life has taken a deeply troubling turn. No longer content to agree to disagree, many wish to destroy their opponents. When millions of clever small time stock traders discover a way to enrich themselves at the expense of hedge fund managers who have become plutocrats at the expense of the rest of us, those small-timers must be crushed. When others disagree with "the good guys" on Twitter they must lose their jobs and all prospect of getting new ones. This is evil and must stop. As Jesus followers let us receive the Spiritual gift of peacemaking that we might maintain the fabric of our nation and our culture.

As Jesus followers, let us obey his call to live out the love of God. The consequences of our failure would be terrible. The consequences of our success would be wonderful. With God's help, obey God.