

December 12, 2010

Crowds and Cores

Mark 3:7-21

INTRODUCTION

Ogres are like onions: at least that's what an old green philosopher once said. He meant they have layers. Well real truth can be a real ogre. This is especially true in the world we live in today where the more deeply or exact you want to get something that matters for eternity, the more you come across as a monster. But Jesus has a unique quality to him. His ministry was blowing up. He was a magnet. He was inherently attractive to every kind of person *until* they realize they want to kill him. But that needs to be sifted out of a crowd.

There are two layers of truth in this passage and I hope you get both. If most people walk away with just one of the two layers I'll be happy—but I'm really shooting for both layers as I preach and I hope you strive for both layers as you hear! At the outer layer—the most obvious layer—the kingdom of God is like a big crowd gathering around a big God; but not everybody in the crowd is genuine. In fact most are not. There are crowds and then there are cores. And the core will be important—not because they're so wonderful, but—because Jesus is going to turn them into world-changers, but He has to take them up to the mountain, away from the crowds, to teach them things that crowds can't handle. Crowds and cores in starting a church (that's the outer layer—you might say the layer that the crowd can handle). There's a deeper level, but I'm not going to peel that far into the onion until you see it for yourself. I'm going to let you, the listener to God's word, do the hard work of cutting into this onion and crying for yourself, like a good onion should make you.

- A GREAT CROWD FOLLOWED JESUS
- A SMALL BUT IMPORTANT CORE WAS CALLED

The Big Idea is that Jesus attracts numbers but He appoints whom He desires.

DOCTRINE

I. A GREAT CROWD FOLLOWED JESUS

A) Christian Crowd Control

1. *Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed (7a)*. This is the tension we will see throughout the Gospels (We've already seen it)—big crowd, but a deeper mission that has a solid core to it. We saw it when Jesus withdrew to pray. We've seen it when Jesus silenced the demons, as well as when He told the man he healed to keep things on the down-low. So notice the balance yet again: Jesus wants the **biggest production** possible but the **most precise control** over the gospel they hear as possible. There is not a hint of insecurity in all the life and ministry of Jesus! Note the unstoppable, irresistible influence of Jesus over the whole country: *from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him (7b-8)*. So the "crowd control" we see here isn't Jesus panicking or being stingy with the amount of people let it. It is about keeping the eyes of his disciples on the mark. Notice how much this is emphasized! Mark had already stressed that He withdrew from the crowds with his disciples to the sea; now he makes the point to mention the escape vehicle: *And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him (9)*.

2. We now move from the description of this crowd control to the motive for it. The general reason given was that the crowds would not "crush him" or "overwhelm him," but the specific way that played out can be seen in the following words: *for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him (10)*. The crowds were cheating. It is not that physical healing and provision was not going to be an end result of the gospel and the kingdom; but these people were not coming to hear the gospel and be a part of the kingdom of God. They were coming for the fruits of the kingdom without a care in the world for how the tree grew or the seed dropped into the soil to begin with. It never occurs to such people who ask God for a healing, or a job, or a friend that the body breaks back down, the job gets outsourced sooner or later, and the friend dies too. Even the people Jesus raised from the dead died again; and if that's the end, then the physical healings of Jesus are a cruel joke, something that gets our hopes up for a season but nothing more: "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" [1 Cor. 15:19].

So no, Jesus wasn't afraid of the crowds physically crushing him. It's hyperbolic speech to make the point that this crowd is going to 'crowd out' the good news if we don't draw a line in the sand (or the sea). Sometimes the boat was even used as a mobile pulpit [cf. Mk. 4:1]

that would have made it awkward for anyone to “rush the stage” unless they were a really good swimmer!

B) Christian Crown Control

1. Jesus draws a line for the crowds and He draws a line for the demons: *And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” And he strictly ordered them not to make him known (11-12).* Jesus draws a line for the crowds and He draws a line for the demons. Why? He is defining the kingdom. Jesus will not be placed as a puppet king on a temporary throne! And He will prevent this by defining the kingdom. He expects his people in every generation to do the same. We have already seen Jesus silence the demons; and, if you remember, those demons said true things about Jesus [cf. 1:25, 34]. Turn to Acts 16 and see a demonically possessed slave girl announce true, simple, basic things about Jesus:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers [Acts 16:16-19].

What was Paul’s problem? She was just a fan; she was saying true things. Well, maybe Paul knew his Bible ‘too much’ and he knew that when Jesus is marketed to shallow-minded suburban spiritualists, it won’t be the same Jesus for too long—not when it’s done for mere money and numbers.

It is interesting how Mark says that “they fell down before him” meaning that the demons were so in control of these people, you might say by remote control, that this false reverence for the King became visible to the crowds that were there—pretty distracting to say the least. But it’s worse than that. Remember that in 1:1 we saw that **Son of God** (*huios theou*) was a claim to divinity but also a claim to the throne. It was what earthly monarchs appealed to in order to legitimize their authority: they claimed to be “sons of the gods.” The demons were trying to get Jesus on the throne. Why would they want to do that? Well for one thing, it wasn’t the same throne that Jesus was going to sit on.

II. A SMALL BUT IMPORTANT CORE WAS CALLED

A) Jesus Calls an Inner-Circle Out of the Crowd

1. *And he went up on the mountain and called (13a)*. Oh, how the “mountain top” experience is dismissed today with all our talk of rolling up our sleeves and social justice! But you can’t cheat the process of discipleship. The apostles had to be disciples first, and so do you. You say, “Oh yeah, I know—I did a Navigators study when I was in college” or “Did the discipleship thing when I first got saved: now I’m ready for bigger and better things.” But you must have mistaken the person who discipled you for the Lord whose disciple you are. You’re like the drunk who ran into Spurgeon on the streets of London one night and yelled out, “Hey preacher—don’t you remember me, I’m one of your disciples!” Spurgeon replied, “Well you must be one of mine—you’re sure not one of the Lord’s!” Jesus went up a mountain; a bunch of guys who were sold out for the world, the flesh and the devil just a few weeks before followed him up. How? Why? It is that He *called to him those whom he desired (13b)*. Bunyan was uneasy over this verse because he was already uneasy about his own soul. He knew that the finality and urgency of election echoes through such narratives. He saw himself in a crowd—a society who all were “Christian” in name and profession—but something about just being in a Jesus crowd wouldn’t satisfy Bunyan:

But the verse which made me sick was that one about Christ, ‘He went up into a mountain, and called to Him those He himself wanted, and they came to Him’ (Mark 3:13). This scripture made me faint and fear, yet it kindled a fire in my soul.¹

And why do you suppose it kindled a fire? Jesus called to him those whom He desired.

no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him [Mat. 11:27].

He called these men out of a mere crowd. They were sanctified, separated, ordained and appointed for a special purpose. And when Christ calls a man effectually it works every time: *and they came to him (13c)*. It said above—in verse 8—that *When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him*. So two groups of people get two distinct calls from Jesus and both came to him. Both answered the call; but of the first it says, “When they heard all he was doing,” namely: feeding, healing, casting out demons; when they heard that God

¹ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Whittaker House, PA 1993, fp. 1666); p. 41

would take care of their temporary, physical or psychological needs a big church quickly gathered to him. But here, when a small group of people heard directly from God that they would get to be with God and be taught by God, they came to him. Are you starting to see what's under these layers? No one can drown out or resist such a call. He says in John's Gospel, "All that the Father gives me will come to me" [6:37], or again,

but you do not believe **because** you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me [10:26-27].

What Mark wants to stress here isn't just that Jesus has this power to call (*kaleo*), but that this call has a divine purpose. And divine purposes typically get accomplished! The word for call is more complex here (*proskaleitai*): it contains the effective call (*kaleo*), but it is the word used for a specific address, almost as if a parent was to call before reading a story: 'Alright kids gather around,' I'm about to tell you something very special and very exciting. The **call** of God is not a dead, abstract thing—it is a targeted, efficient thing. When God appoints people to life, He appoints them to everything that belongs to life. When God chooses someone out of a crowd to follow him, it is like a divine archer aiming at the bulls-eye of what a perfect man or perfect woman should be like, but since the only people in the crowd are messed up sinners, He has to hit them first so that his arrow takes them all the way to perfection where the bulls-eye is. And do you honestly think that God is a bad shot?—"even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" [Eph. 1:4]. God always gets his man, and He always gets his work done.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you [Jn. 15:16].

So what is the work here?

2. *And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) (14a)*. The mountain top is where God acts. Big things in redemptive history happened on the mountain. What was so history-making on this mountain? Well these twelve correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus even promises them: "you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" [Mat. 12:28]. True, Judas was revealed as a traitor, but Matthias was chosen to fill his seat to fulfill the Scripture, "Let another take his office" [Acts 1:20], meaning that that was meant to happen. When Christ set up the twelfth seat in his

heavenly round table it only went unoccupied down here (from our perspective), but that chair never had Judas' name on it up there: but an obscure man that we never hear about except in that one place in Acts—Matthias. More layers.

But here we have the first use of the word **apostle** (*apostolos*) which means one who is sent. Now what did send them to do? Well not so fast! Let's read the whole of their appointment together: *so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons (14b-15)*. Did you catch that? Two things in the identity of these disciplined ones who were being called out of the mere crowd to turn the world upside down (two parts): 1) so that they might be with him and 2) that they would go to preach with authority to cast out demons. It's the same 'preaching with authority' ministry as we've already seen Jesus have. But don't miss that first part: that they might be with him! "Oh that's just referring to one day in heaven." No, I don't think so. A disciple gets disciplined; and since every Christian is a disciple, then every Christian needs to be brought under the ministry of the word to get trained and equipped. Every Christian needs to walk with Jesus personally before He talks about him to the crowds. Today we are told that we should only be "serving out there" and not "taking in here," "fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium," that "the meat is in the street," but the Bible is constantly telling us that you can't give what you don't have. The disciple whom Jesus loved, who was with Jesus and loved Jesus, says in his evangelism—"we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" [1 Jn. 1:3]. You can't give what you don't have! But he also says that He "might send them out (for two things) to preach and have authority to cast out demons." So what have we learned, if nothing else, about the basics of Jesus' ministry so far in Mark? First, it's centered on the preaching; second, that when He does anything else (like silencing demons) it so that everyone's attention will get back to the center of what He's preaching. So what do you think he's going to send (*apostelle*) the church out to do? Same thing—preach the gospel and protect the gospel. Protect the gospel from demons? Really? Yes—really:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel [2 Cor. 4:4].

If you were a demon in the world today, what is the most powerful thing you could do? I'll tell you what I would do—I would keep people from seeing the light of the gospel and hearing the harmony of the gospel and tasting the sweetness of the gospel—in other words, I would do what demons have been doing most from the beginning of the Fall: to distract, deflect, detract, distort, to keep you from the content of the gospel! I will hold up a mirror

in the Scriptures so that every time you read anything in the Scripture you would see your magnificent part to play in creation! I would want to show you your best life now; I would want to tell you the old, old story of how Jesus wants to make you a better you!

Now when you get done reading this list of the disciples (and do a little math—hmm, twelve minus one) and then see what his family thinks about him, you might say:

B) How Many More Layers of this Onion are There!

1. Two classes of people show up here who appear to be very close to Jesus. One was one of his disciples, and he betrays him; another was his family who are ready to have him locked up. First of all, Judas. In the list of disciples he was last of all. Do you think that Judas caught Jesus by surprise? Do you think that Judas was an exception to the rule that those whom God calls, He glorifies? Let me show you a few Scriptures that will challenge your view:

He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.” Judas, who would betray him, answered, “Is it I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said so” [Mat. 26:23-25].

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **to do whatever** *your hand and your plan had predestined to take place* [Acts 4:27-28].

So Jesus isn't just really good at predicting or the infinite chess player. He doesn't just know Judas is going to do this; He knew it from the beginning. And He didn't just know it. According to Peter in those words in Acts, He caused it. Judas was a pawn on his chess board. Listen to the connection between Jesus knowing all along about Judas and the call of God that causes it in John's Gospel:

But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” [Jn. 6:64-65].

2. Then there's a group that was even closer to Jesus than the disciples—his own biological family—and they didn't follow him. In fact they were beginning to think He needed to be locked up! We'll read more about that in a few weeks, as verses 31-35 pick up that same thought.

Does physical closeness to Jesus equal ultimate closeness to Jesus? How physically close to Jesus are you? Pharisees touched his face—do you know that?—“Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him” [Mat. 26:67]. They got pretty close to Jesus—they punched God in the face. And Judas kissed his cheek! [cf. Mat. 26:49] They touched the face of God. When you stop and think about it becomes as clear as day that there are (at least) two kinds of being close to Jesus, two kinds of being called by Jesus. But you have to peel away the layers and look into it.

On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I **never knew you**; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ [Mat. 7:22-23].

3. There is a line in the sand between the **house** (*oikos*) and the **crowd** (*ochlos*): *Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat (20)*. In this whole passage from beginning to end, and in everything we have seen in Mark so far, Jesus wants his people to be gathering, to be scattering, to be in the streets and moving in the crowds (that’s all good; that’s all necessary) but if they do not come back to the house of God to be disciplined for their whole lives—to think about hard things like this—they will lose their grip on reality: they will lose their grip on the definition of the kingdom, and the integrity of the gospel will be lost in a crowd.

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – The goal of Christianity is not to draw a crowd, because the goal of Jesus Christ is not to be glorified *only* in his ability to gather. There is more of the excellence of Christ than his attractiveness that draws crowds—and He *is* inherently, magnetically attractive! But do you think for a second that Jesus needs to wait for a crowd to “get it” for Him to bring them to himself? The whole world is already a crowd gathered within the theater of Christ. If that were the end game, the game would already be over. But Jesus will be worshipped, according to Revelation, for so much more than that:

for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God **from** (out of the crowd) every tribe and language and people and nation [Rev. 5:9]

The goal of Christianity does not begin and end with drawing any old crowd. And therefore the success of a Christian endeavor is not judged by how crowds respond, but by what the endeavor says about the character of God. We have never before seen a time in history when those *in* the church—in the “Christian crowd”—think so identical to the skeptic about these things. The professing Christian in America scoffs at any scripture, any truth, any philosophy of ministry, any sermon, anybody, who does what they do from the perspective of the core of what God is doing. And those who are always demanding that we stay at the surface bear witness that they are among those who are at the surface, in the crowd, but not interested in hearing Christ’s voice. The truth is the core of Christ is an unattractive place for you because Christ is there! The core of biblical truth is repulsive to you because Christ is still repulsive to you. If every time God says, Look at my Son, Look at what I’ve done, Look at my glory, you say “Ah—that won’t play with the crowd,” don’t look now, but *you’re in* the crowd and the truth is that’s where you want to stay!

To the Saint – In his book, *Building Leaders*, Aubrey Malphurs says this:

Toward the end of his ministry, the Savior poured his life into the Twelve because he knew that they, not the crowd, would make a difference in the first century world that, in turn, would affect the rest of time...Jesus’ example serves as a challenge for those of us who desire to take our ministries into the twenty-first century. More mega-churches exist today than at any other time in the history of North America, and they draw a crowd. They and their congregations can fall into the subtle trap of measuring their success by the size of the crowd. Jesus’ example teaches us, however, that the ministry payoff is not the size of the ministry—the crowd—but the size of the leader’s trainees—the core. Success comes in our core of competent godly leaders at every level of the ministry who will take the ministry well into the twenty-first century, long after we’ve been forgotten.²

That’s another thing about thinking from the core to the crowds—it protects against arrogance and extinction. If we built ministry at an inch deep and a mile wide, then a mile of people would be gathering around one man (and it wouldn’t be Jesus), and when does anyone else grow to maturity when all anyone else is doing is getting more crowds together? It produces arrogance in the leaders and codependency in the crowds to build ministries or plant churches really fast around one man. What happens if the man drops dead? What happens if scandal hits? Those are bad things. But even in good things, what happens if a thousand desperate sinners show up in a one or two year stretch and there’s only one guy capable of answering their questions, teaching them, etc? A church that doesn’t seriously

² Aubrey Malphurs & Will Mancini, *Building Leaders* (Baker, Grand Rapids 2004); p. 24

emphasize training up a big core from the beginning is a church that will be wiped out of existence within the first generation. What they leave behind will not last for eternity. We have been very intentional to start with the core at The Well and we will continue to imitate Jesus in this model.

To the Sinner – Now if you’ve heard all this and heard just enough to realize, “That’s me in the crowd. I’m part of the crowd of Jesus, not part of the core of Jesus. And that seems sinful.”

(Please note that I’m not speaking here to the person who doesn’t see that as sinful. The gospel has no good news to speak anyway to those who don’t believe they’ve done anything wrong. I’m also not speaking to the new believer who is excited about Jesus but just getting started, so you feel like you’re still at the outer layers; nor am I talking about someone new to the church and you’re not in the core of this particular church—not talking about either of those two things: so beware of false condemnation!)

I’m speaking to the person who sees that the sin of coming to Jesus *only* to be part of a crowd that I can hide in, punch the religious time clock, hope that He won’t judge me a sinner because I’m standing close enough to his saints, hope that I can come and not necessarily accept everything I hear out of his word—to the person who sees why this is SIN *because* it is the same thing as not coming directly to Christ: Jesus never commanded us to come to anyone else other than himself for salvation. Yes He commands us to enjoy the spiritual disciplines together at church—but that’s not what I’m talking about. I mean coming to a crowd as a substitute, as an alternative, to coming *to him every time He speaks*, to enjoy fellowship *with him*, to be built up *by him*, into the image *of him*. To hide in an alternative to coming to him: that is sin; that is treason; that will not stand up in his court on Judgment Day...But He speaks to you now:

CONCLUSION

What does Jesus have to say to you now—if you can hear everything I just said now? He says, “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” [Is. 1:18].