

Mark 2-3 – Ministry Opposition and Growth

An Outline

- I. The Beginning of Conflict (Mark 2:1-3:6)
 - A. Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man (Mark 2:1-12) – Only God can forgive sins
 - B. Jesus Calls Levi and Eats with Sinners (Mark 2:13-17) - Eats with tax collectors & sinners
 - C. Jesus Questioned about Fasting (Mark 2:18-22) – His disciples don't fast
 - D. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-27) – His disciples are violating Sabbath laws
 - E. Jesus Heals on the Sabbath (3:1-6)
- II. Crowds Follow Jesus (3:7-12)
- III. Jesus Appoints the Twelve (3:13-19)
- IV. Jesus Accused by His Family and by Teachers of the Law (3:20-35)

Questions for Study

Chapter 2

1. **Jesus Authority to Forgive Sins:** A paralytic was brought by four friends to be healed by Jesus. Two things are notable here. First, notice whose faith becomes the basis for Jesus's healing the paralytic. It is not the faith of the paralytic but the faith of his friends (Mark 2:5). I would contend that faith was not required for Jesus to heal. Otherwise, how could He raise the dead, for the dead had no capacity to believe Jesus? When Lazarus was raised, there was no one believing except Jesus. Therefore, when "faith healers" fail to heal, it is likely because of the healer rather than the one being healed. The healer has no authority or power to heal, whether for lack of faith or for lack of gifting. Second, Jesus asserts His authority to forgive by the evidence of His power to heal as "the Son of Man," a title given of the Messiah by the prophet Daniel (Daniel 7:13-14). And when Jesus said, "Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk,'" He was not referring to the fewness of the words but rather the authority needed for both. As the Son of Man had authority on earth to heal, so He had authority to forgive sins. One was not harder or easier than the other. He could do both. Jesus would say to His disciples, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is I me; or at least believe **on the evidence of the works themselves**" (John 14:11). His signs gave testimony to His authority as Messiah (Hebrews 2:3-4). This was the first instance of conflict with the teachers of the Law. They thought Jesus was blaspheming God when He forgave sins (Mark 2:6-7).
2. **More Conflict with Religious Leaders – Associating with Sinners:** Again, Jesus landed on the wrong side of religious leaders. This time was when He chose to eat with known "tax collectors and sinners." They believed that such an association would cause defilement. But Jesus had a different opinion: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). At first, Jesus' words seem uncritical and simply

pedagogical; however, we would learn later that He was not implying that the religious leaders were “healthy” or “righteous” but they *thought themselves* to be healthy and righteous (cf. John 9:40-41; Luke 18:9; 16:15). They only had the appearance of righteousness (Matthew 23:28). They were self-righteous. On the other hand, it was not simply the sick and sinners Jesus was reaching, but those who recognized that they were sick and sinful and needing a Savior, just like the tax-collector in Jesus’s parable, who humbled himself in prayer (Luke 18:9-14). The focus is again on the authority of Jesus, even the recognition by sinners of their need for Him.

3. **More Conflict with Religious Leaders – Not fasting like the Pharisees:** We are told that both John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting (Mark 2:18). Likely, only the disciples of John, who had not come over to Jesus, were fasting. That people were so aware of these groups fasting may suggest that they were making a show of it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against such displays and that fasting should be done in secret and for God’s approval, not man’s (Matthew 6:16-18).

Jesus spoke of “the bridegroom” being with them so that there was no need to fast at the time. This is the same bridegroom imagery that John the Baptist would use to describe Jesus. He described himself as the bridegroom’s friend, whose joy was fulfilled in the coming of the bridegroom (John 3:29). While Jesus, the bridegroom, was with them, there would be rejoicing, not fasting. Only when He would be “taken away” (a first hint at his crucifixion), would they mourn and fast.

Finding this a teaching moment, Jesus introduced another metaphor, that of old and new garments and old and new wineskins (Mark 2:21-22). As new cloths needed to be attached to new garments, so new wine needed to go into new wineskins. The coming of Christ, the bridegroom, was the initiation of a new covenant. New covenant thinking and practices were, therefore, required. The Mosaic Law represented the old covenant. One replaced the other. As John writes, “Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17). In order for people to receive the new wine (new covenant), they need to become like new wineskins, open to learn and adapt; otherwise, they would not be able to receive Him.

4. **More Conflict with Religious Leaders – Violation of the Sabbath:** Jesus’s disciples picked some heads of grain on a Sabbath because they were hungry (Mark 2:23; Matthew 12:1). The Pharisees claimed that this was a violation of the Sabbath. It may have been a violation of their Sabbath tradition; however, it was not a violation of the Mosaic Law (cf. Deuteronomy 23:25). The Pharisees chose to interpret the Sabbath law in its most restrictive sense, and by doing so, they violated the principle taught in Hosea 6:6, where God says, “I desire mercy over sacrifice.” They were condemning the disciples, who were guiltless. Jesus gave the example of David’s men eating the forbidden consecrated bread in the days of Abiathar as an example of applying the Law correctly, honoring the letter of the Law while not letting go of the principle of mercy (cf. 2 Samuel 21:1-6). The priest could have been very restrictive and forbidden David’s men from eating the sacred bread; however, he chose to be merciful, interpreting the three days the men were abstinent from women (cf. Exodus 19:14-15, 17) as a kind of consecration, enabling them to be fit to eat the consecrated bread. Jesus also declared that He was the Lord of the Sabbath. In what way was Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath? Both as the Son of God and as the One who before them authoritatively exemplified the proper application of the Sabbath.

Chapter 3

1. The Nature of Stubborn Hearts (3:1-6) – One Sabbath Jesus was in a synagogue and there was a man with a shriveled hand there. We are told that some people were “looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.” These people were not interested in rational discussion or gaining understanding. They could care less that this unfortunate man had been unable to work because of his shriveled hand and had to beg all his life to live. They were not even interested in seeing Jesus’s miraculous power to heal. They had a singular thought, namely, to find a reason to accuse Jesus. They had already rejected Him in their hearts and were now simply seeking any justification to condemn Him. Jesus tried to reason with them. He appealed to the principle of good and evil, of giving life and taking life, with reference to the Sabbath. Was the Sabbath restriction designed to prohibit people from saving someone in danger? If their work animal fell into a pit, would they not lift it out, even though it was the Sabbath? Were people not more important than animals? (cf. Luke 14:5; Matthew 12:11-12) There was nothing in the Sabbath Law that forbid these things, even though their traditions may have. Led by the religious leaders of their day, they were going beyond the Sabbath requirement in the Law of Moses, and in so doing, they were violating the very spirit of the Sabbath, which was for the benefit of man and not vice versa (Mark 2:27).

In spite of Jesus’s best efforts, these people were not going to change. Somewhat like “never-Trumpers” today, they were only interested in finding reasons to accuse Jesus, not to believe Him. Jesus was “deeply distressed” because of the stubbornness of their hearts. And when Jesus miraculously healed the man, their joy was not in the power of God nor in the restoration of a man’s life but that they had a reason, contrived as it was, to both accuse and kill Him (Mark 3:6).

2. Jesus’s Widespread Appeal (3:7-12) – People as far north as Tyre and Sidon (Pheonicia) and as far south as Idumea (Edom) came to hear Jesus in Galilee. Remember the feeding of the five thousand (5000 men not including women and children)? There were thousands listening to Him. How could He address them all without a microphone or some kind of amplification system? In the 1970s, archaeologist B. Cobbey Crisler and professional sound engineer Mark Miles set up equipment at a cove on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They investigated the natural terrain and whether it acted like an auditorium with Jesus at the “stage” (in their study, a boat in the Galilee) and the crowd in the “seats” (the slopes). *It did!* But Crisler and Miles unexpectedly found that the reverse also occurred: speech from the “seats” was clearly heard at the “stage.” Natural amphitheatres, it turns out, exist all along the shores of the Sea of Galilee—and Jesus used them as “public address systems” to teach the crowds. [Source: Beitzel, Barry. *Lexham Commentary on the Gospels*. Lexham Press, 2018. (See the full article: “The Acoustics and Crowd Capacity of Natural Theaters in Palestine.” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 1976: 128–141.)

The One who heals the sick and calms the storms could also find the perfect place to provide the best acoustics to communicate the Word of God.



3. Judas Iscariot was one of the Twelve! (Mark 3:13-19) – Jesus set apart twelve men to be in His inner circle. Among them was a quick-tongued fisherman, two selfishly ambitious and wrathful sons of Zebedee, a notorious tax-collector, a doubter, and a man who would betray Him to death. If we were there with Jesus, we might have said to Jesus, “What in the world were you thinking when you selected these men?!” Yet, I believe He would have said that these were just the men that he needed to fulfill God’s purposes, and that included Judas Iscariot, “the son of perdition” (John 17:12), whose destiny was determined even before he was born (Psalm 41:9; cf. John 13:10-11, 18). Jesus did not choose these Twelve haphazardly. The parallel passage in Luke tells us that Jesus prayed all night before choosing them (Luke 6:12-16). If we only had the Gospels, we might conclude that Jesus made some really bad choices, but the Book of Acts and all history reveal that He made the right choices, and those that we might think were the worst choices would become the most important for the fulfillment of God’s purposes.

When we pray to God, let us follow Jesus’s example and not second guess the decisions we entrust to God. We have such a limited perspective. Let us trust God’s eternal perspective. It is an insult to God to commit to Him our decisions and afterward wonder or doubt whether we made the right decision. What we commit to Him let us trust that He will work it out according to His perfect will (Proverbs 3:5-6).

4. Jesus’s own family did not believe at first (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35) – We cannot make this claim just from the passages in Mark, but John 7:5 clearly indicate that Jesus’s brothers did not believe in Him at first. Unlike the Roman Catholic teaching that Mary remained a virgin, the Bible clearly teaches that Mary had children after Jesus, both sons and daughters (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55-56). After the resurrection, at least two of His brothers, Jude and James, came to faith and became leaders of the church, even authors of two epistles in the New Testament. Jude begins his letter with “Jude, **a servant of Jesus Christ** and a brother of James” (Jude 1). James begins his letter with “James, **a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**” (James 1:1). They both recognize Jesus as their Lord.

It certainly must have been hard or at least awkward for Jesus’s siblings to live with One who was morally perfect (Hebrews 4:15) and peerless in his intellect and wisdom (cf. Luke 2:47). They may have been jealous of the unusual attention their parents gave Him. At least in the early part of His ministry, they may have been jealous of His popularity. Then they were likely shocked by His sudden, terrible and undeserving death. Yet, after His resurrection, His brothers James and Jude become notable believers and leaders. Even though Jesus said that a prophet was not honored in his own hometown or even in his own household (Mark 6:4; Matthew 13:57), this did not mean they were hopeless. After praying over thirty years for my unbelieving mom, I thought she would never believe in Jesus. Yet a month before she passed away from brain cancer, she trusted Jesus as her Savior.

Ultimately, the true family of God is not our biological parents, brothers and sisters but our spiritual parents, brothers and sisters. Jesus said, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). While we are called to obey our parents, just as we are called to obey the ruling authorities, when these authorities lead us contrary to God’s will, we must obey God rather than them (Acts 5:29; Luke 14:26).

5. What is the unforgiveable sin? (Mark 4:22-30) – The teachers of the Law, the intellectual group among the religious leaders, figure out a way to frame Jesus’ miracles, so that they can accuse and condemn Him. They frame Jesus’ miracles, particularly His ability to exorcise demons, as done by the power of the prince of demons, Beelzebub (lit. “Lord of the flies,” likely representative of Satan). What

the people attributed to the power of God in the Messiah (Matthew 12:22-23), the religious leaders attributed to Satan (Matthew 12:24). Jesus revealed the folly of such framing: "How can Satan drive out Satan. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." Jesus explained that the truth was exactly opposite what the religious leaders thought: "In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house" (Mark 3:27). Jesus was able to do what He did because He successfully restrained and overcame the leader of the demons. He did this, not by demonic power but by the power of the Holy Spirit. This ministry of the Spirit authenticated Jesus's identity as the Messiah. He baptized by the Spirit. The Spirit gave witness to John the Baptist that Jesus was the Messiah. The Spirit led and empowered Jesus to resist and prevail against the temptations of Satan in the wilderness. And the Spirit was what empowered Jesus to perform the signs and wonders that the Old Testament prophesied would accompany the coming of the Messiah.

By attributing Jesus's works to demons, the religious leaders were rejecting the very signs given to them for faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. By recasting this sign as something demonic, they were not simply rejecting Jesus but also closing their minds to the authenticating evidence. That is why this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," the rejection of the Spirit's witness to the Messiah, was an "unforgiveable" and "eternal" sin. They were rejecting the very path to forgiveness. They were not simply saying, "We don't believe." They were saying, "We can't believe." By attributing the works of God to demons, they were precluding all hope of salvation. Consequently, I believe the unpardonable sin is the utter hardening of the heart to faith, a rejection of God's Holy Spirit invitation by attributing what God is doing to Satan. For such a person, no forgiveness is possible. It is like the man, dying of thirst, who chooses to see the water offered to him as dry sand. As long as he has such a view of things, he will die of thirst. And such is the fate of anyone who rejects the Spirit's witness. They will die forever in their sin.

Discussion Question

When you have a decision to make, do you pray about it? When you pray about it, do you seek God's wisdom and direction? When you seek His wisdom and direction, do you then leave every outcome to Him? (Proverbs 3:5-6; 16:9, 33)

After a decision is made and things don't go as you like, do you revisit your decision and question the wisdom or rightness of it? In other words, do you second-guess your decision even though you have given it to the Lord?

Share with one another your experience in praying for the will of God in your decision-making. Did you trust God regardless of the outcome or did you repeatedly second-guess your decision for fear of an undesirable outcome?