

Mark – The First Gospel

003 – *Signs of the Kingdom – Mark 1:16-34*

All outlines, audio recording of discussions, and works referenced may be accessed and viewed at <http://markthefirstgospel.blogspot.com/> .

First Thoughts

There are many ways to organize the next section of what are stories of the “signs of the kingdom.” Every commentary and study note arranges and organizes the passages a little differently. I’ve found the following organization helpful in picturing what we will be studying over the next several sessions. I’ve chosen to use Mark 1:14 through 3:21 as the broader unit (see *Table 1: Topical Organization, Mark 1:14-3:21*).

What can be seen from the table is Mark’s rhetorical use of “sandwich stories” (e.g., Simon Peter in 1:16-20 and 1:29-34), the use of parallel settings (e.g., house vs. synagogue), contrasts (e.g., reception of Jesus by the crowds vs. the Pharisees and scribes), and the repetition of themes (e.g., secrecy, call of disciples, unclean spirits).

The first part of this major section reveals the crowd’s acceptance of Jesus, while in contrast the second part describes Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders and their rejection of him. What is also interesting is that by the end of this unit, the crowds are coming to Galilee to see Jesus from Jerusalem, greater Judea, and even from Tyre and Sidon. This is in direct contrast to the opening of Mark where crowds were going to see John the Baptist in the Judean wilderness, and only Jesus comes from Galilee.

I see the calling of the disciples and the topic of discipleship bookending this unit. This is also the topic that forms an undercurrent of all of the stories that are placed here. Jesus calls the disciples and as they follow he provides examples of what the kingdom of God looks like. At the end of this unit the disciples are called together, the Twelve apostles selected and commissioned to do exactly as he has shown them. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God, it is to be proclaimed, and they are accompanied by signs that demonstrate the breaking-in of God’s kingdom into the dominion of evil.

Ideally we would be able to examine the entire unit in one sitting, but that is far too much material. Thus we will study the first four parts this session. We already looked at the first part (vv. 14-15) so we will not spend much space with it but it provides critical background and context into the next part (vv. 16-20). I see vv. 16-34 as a good smaller unit because it begins with the call of some of the disciples, including Peter, and ends with Jesus in Peter’s mother-in-law’s house.

Table 1: Topical Organization, Mark 1:14-3:21

Verses	Motifs	Gospel	Proclamation	Disciples/ Calling	Peter	Healing	Unclean Spirits/ Healing	Secrecy	Declarations	Synagogue	House	Capernaum	Wilderness	Crowds	Withdrawal	Criticism	Tradition	Pharisees/ Scribes	Family	Crowd Amazed
1:14-15	John the Baptist arrested, gospel, kingdom, proclamation	X	X																	
1:16-20	Calling of disciples, following, Peter			X	X															
1:21-28	Synagogue, Capernaum, teaching, unclean spirits, exorcism, authority, sign, declarations about Jesus, secrecy						X	X	X	X		X								X
1:29-34	House, healing, demons, exorcism, declarations, crowds, Peter, secrecy				X	X	X	X	X		X			X			?			
1:35-39	Withdrawal, away from Capernaum, wilderness, prayer, gospel, proclamation, Peter	X	X	X								X	X		X					
1:40-45	Leper, healing, declarations, wilderness, crowds, secrecy					X		X	X				X	X						
2:1-12	Return to Capernaum, house, crowds, healing, Jesus forgives, scribes, criticism, authority, sign, declarations					X			X		X	X		X		X	X			X
2:13-14	Levi Matthew called, following			X																
2:15-17	House, scribes, criticism, gospel, proclamation	X	X								X					X		X		
2:18-22	John the Baptist's disciples, Pharisees' disciples, fasting, criticism, reinterpretation of tradition															X	X	X		
2:23-28	Sabbath, Pharisees, criticism, reinterpretation of tradition															X	X	X		
3:1-6	Synagogue, Sabbath, healing, Pharisees, criticism, reinterpretation of tradition, plot to destroy Jesus					X				X						X	X	X		
3:7-12	Crowds, withdrawal, healing, unclean spirits, exorcism, declarations, secrecy					X	X	X	X					X	X					
3:13-19	Calling of the Twelve, gospel, proclamation, exorcism	X	X	X			X													
3:20-21	Crowds, home, family thinks Jesus is crazy										X			X		X			X	

First Disciples

16 Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (ESV)

1. Abruptness

- a. Just as John the Baptist and Jesus appears abruptly in Mark's account, so does the call of the first disciples
- b. Avoid the temptation to bring in details from the other gospels
 - i. We need to figure out what Mark is trying to communicate by his deliberate omissions of detail
 - ii. But we do need to consider the details that Mark does include

2. Details

- a. This account follows immediately after Jesus begins proclaiming that the "time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (v. 15)
 - i. The call and the response to it is a consequence of Jesus' proclamation
 - ii. We can and should recognize that Simon, Andrew, James, and John are responding to the gospel proclamation – this is an example of "repentance"
 - iii. The kingdom has come; there is no time to delay making a decision
 - iv. You are either in the kingdom or you are not; there is no in-between state
 1. Particularly important for Christians under pressure who do have to make a definitive choice, for or against
- b. Two pairs of brothers in two parallel accounts – both are fishermen
- c. First pair is fishing; the second pair, mending nets

Mark employs the technical term for the throwing out of the circular casting net, which had a diameter varying from ten to fifteen feet. The outer edge was weighted to allow the net to sink rapidly, imprisoning fish under it; in the middle of the net was a rope by means of which it could be pulled up. With such a net, usually only a few fish were taken with each cast.¹

- i. Fishing was very labor-intensive
 - ii. There is active fishing time, but also time spent to tend to the equipment
 1. Is there a spiritual analogy that Mark might be alluding to here?
- d. The call is to "follow" Jesus and be made into "fishers of men"

¹ NICNT: Mark, 1:16-20, note 97.

The call to come after someone implies discipleship because it is the disciple who breaks all other ties to follow his master as a servant. Yet far more than this was involved in the call to become "fishers of men." To interpret this phrase only as a play on words appropriate to the situation is to fail to appreciate its biblical background and its relevance to the context, which has focused attention on God's eschatological act in sending Jesus. In the OT prophetic tradition it is God who is the fisher of men. The passages in which the image is developed are distinctly ominous in tone, stressing the divine judgment... The summons to be fishers of men is a call to the eschatological task of gathering men in view of the forthcoming judgment of God... Precisely because Jesus has come fishing becomes necessary. Between Ch. 1:15 and Ch. 1:17 there is a most intimate connection; fishing is the evidence of the fulfilment which Jesus proclaimed, the corollary of the in-breaking kingdom.²

In his call the Markan Jesus promises to make the four fishermen into "fishers of people." The notion of fishing for humans was common in both Greek and Jewish culture (The following discussion is based on Wuellner 1967, *passim*). To be caught in the nets of the gods was a symbol of salvation. Since evil spirits were also believed to be fishing for people, it was important to put oneself in a position to be caught by the benevolent spiritual powers. According to Greek tradition, the way to avoid the nets of the evil spirits was to travel on the road of Zeus (*Dios hodos*). In the prophetic tradition Yahweh may appoint others to be fishers. In particular, the enemies of Israel are understood as Yahweh's fishers, gathering Israel for judgment (Ezek 17:19- 21; Jer 16:16). But this judgment is designed to lead to Israel's return to covenant faithfulness; it is a kind of discipline, designed to correct, not to destroy. Israelite and Hellenistic traditions merge in the novella *Joseph and Aseneth*, where Aseneth, the Egyptian princess, speaks about her conversion to the one true God by the witness of Joseph: "... by his wisdom he grasped me like a fish on a hook, and by his spirit, as by bait of life, he ensnared me" (*JosAsen* 21:21).³

- e. Both pairs *immediately* leave their current lives to follow Jesus
 - i. For Christians in crisis, where they may literally face having to leave their current lives, this could act as comfort and encouragement
 - ii. Temporal vs. eternal security
 - iii. Family ties were of utmost importance in the ancient world, but here Mark shows that the claims of Jesus take priority
- f. James and John are part of a family business that includes hired hands
 - i. They are not abandoning their families to poverty
 - ii. But the future of the family business is in question with their response
- g. Jesus' call is not to everyone, not even every member of a family, but to these specific four individuals

² NICNT: Mark, 1:16-18.

³ Reading Mark: 1:16-20.

- i. Not everyone is called to leave everything behind
 - ii. All are called to serve – some serve by leaving; others by staying
- 3. Jesus' authority over his followers causes a response from them

First Sign

21 And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. 23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are— the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. (ESV)

A possible chiastic structure for the remainder of chapter 1 may be seen as follows:

Table 2: Chiastic Structure 1:21-45 (Reading Mark)

A- Jesus makes a demon "go out from" a man. Jesus contrasted with the scribes (1:21- 27)
B- Jesus 'reputation goes from a synagogue into "all Galilee" (1:28)
C- Simon's mother-in-law is healed by Jesus (1:29- 31)
D- Summary: healings, exorcisms, Jesus' identity (1:32- 34)
C' - Simon interrupts Jesus' prayer (1:35- 38)
B' - Jesus goes into synagogues in "all Galilee" (1:39)
A' - Jesus makes leprosy "go off of" a man. Jesus contrasted with the priests (1:40- 45)

1. Setting: Capernaum, Sabbath, synagogue
 - a. Looking forward
 - i. The precise mention of Sabbath may be prefiguring conflicts to be related in just a short while
 - ii. The locations are significant:

Jesus 'ministry in this panel begins in a synagogue and ends in a desert place. Throughout the Gospel the Markan Jesus will repeat this move from traditionally sacred space to secular space. Eventually, all sacred spaces will be replaced by "the house," which is a place of healing, table fellowship, and instruction of disciples.⁴

- b. Christians do not need a designated "sacred space"
 - i. All places where Christians tread can be sacred

⁴ Reading Mark, 1:21-27 (A) and 1:40-45 (A').

- ii. Comfort and encouragement to Christians driven from their usual places of worship, driven out of synagogues, driven from their homes, and into the “wilderness”

2. Action

- a. Jesus teaches – people are amazed
- b. Jesus rebukes and casts out an unclean spirit – people are amazed
- c. Why were the people amazed?

Torah-teachers (scribes) did not have *s'mikhah* (were not ordained as rabbis...) and therefore could not bring *chiddushim* (introduce new interpretations) or *posek halakhah* (make legal judgments...). This is why the people were amazed...: Yeshua taught like a rabbi and not like a scribe. This was one level of amazement.

The second level of amazement was that he taught as one who had authority himself. No rabbi taught (or judged, *pasak*) against the *halakhah* of his own rabbi. But Yeshua, who had no rabbi of his own, appeared to have authority beyond that of any of the rabbis...⁵

- d. Amazement is not faith

Magic produces amazement (almost never a favorable term in Mark's Gospel), but amazement is not faith. In the great eschatological battle for the religious imagination that is Mark 1 (and arguably, the entire Gospel), Mark calls his audience not to amazement over the wonder-working deeds of Jesus, but to faith in the One who has already won the eschatological battle over Satan.⁶

- i. It conveys more alarm than a positive reaction
- ii. Jesus spoke with an authority that compels a decision

- 3. Result: Jesus' fame spreads to all the surrounding regions of Galilee
 - a. Good and bad – his presence and message becomes known, but it also attracts unwanted attention
- 4. Proclamation and action are equated to a single act: teaching
 - a. Mark records little of the content of Jesus' proclamations
 - b. But for Mark, proclamation and resulting action come as a unit
- 5. This episode marks the beginning of the kingdom of God dispossessing Satan and his demons

The theme of Jesus' expulsion of evil spirits, or demons, from people is certainly a major part of Mark's story. We shall encounter numerous examples of this theme in subsequent episodes, and so the reader is here prepared to view Jesus' ministry as an attack upon these evil powers. We see in this that the "kingdom of God" that Jesus announces in verse 15 involves the deliverance from demonic forces of people like the man in this episode. This gives to the phrase "kingdom of

⁵ *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Mark 1:22.

⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1689.

God" a dynamic and material reality, making it far more than simply an ethical concept. As this scene shows, the kingdom (or reign) of God is God's power (authority) in action.⁷

- a. The existence of Satan and demons are assumed
- b. We should not try to explain some or all of this and following "demonic" episodes with modern psychosomatic explanations
- c. The demoniac in this episode speaks in the plural
 - i. Could be the speaker represents multiple demons
 - ii. Or the demon may be referring to all those in attendance at the synagogue

In the question "What have we to do with you?" it is natural to find a reference to all of the demonic powers who shall be destroyed by Jesus. But it is also distinctly possible that the demoniac identifies himself with the congregation and speaks from their perspective: Jesus' presence entails the danger of judgment for all present.⁸

- d. The demoniac speaks Jesus name and title
 - i. It is not an act of confession but an attempt to use his name to disarm him
 - ii. Ancient people believed that knowing a being's name allowed control over it

This formula of recognition, however, does not stand alone. It is part of a larger complex of material exhibiting a striking difference between the forms of address employed by the demoniacs and the titles used by ordinary sick individuals. The latter group appeal to Jesus as "Lord" (Ch. 7:8), "Teacher" (Ch. 9:17), "Son of David" (Ch. 10:47-48) or "Master" (Ch. 10:51). The demoniacs, however, address Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (Ch. 1:24), "the Son of God" (Ch. 3:11) or "the Son of the Most High God" (Ch. 5:7), formulations which identify Jesus as the divine Son of God. The contrast in address is an important characteristic distinguishing ordinary sickness from demonic possession, and reflects the superior knowledge of the demons. The recognition-formula is not a confession, but a defensive attempt to gain control of Jesus in accordance with the common concept of that day, that the use of the precise name of an individual or spirit would secure mastery over him.⁹

- e. Jesus reveals his authority and its nature by simply rebuking and commanding. He does not go through an elaborate ritual or magical incantation.
- f. The Markan gospel does not end with Jesus' resurrection. It continues with every generation of Christians. The conflict with Satan and demons continues as well. Just as

⁷ UBC: Mark, 1:21-28.

⁸ NICNT: Mark, 1:23-24.

⁹ NICNT: Mark, 1:23-24.

Jesus is killed, Christians may face difficulties and even death. But the advance of the kingdom of God cannot be stopped.

6. Jesus' authority over demons is a direct effect of the kingdom of God breaking through

Word and work are intertwined such that the power at work in the exorcism is still active whenever Jesus' word is proclaimed.¹⁰

First Healing

29 And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. 31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. (ESV)

1. Setting moves to a home, a more intimate setting
 - a. Return to a family setting (continued from v. 16-20, the call)
2. Simon has left all to follow Jesus' call, but he has not abandoned his family
 - a. It is about priorities, not abandonment
3. Jesus "works" on the Sabbath, again

The last words of verse 31, "and she began to serve them," may hint at Simon's mother-in-law's gratitude for Jesus' healing her, although it is more likely a reminder that by this point in the narrative we have come to the end of a Sabbath day, and work is again permitted. This means that Jesus has twice done what the Pharisees will later label "not lawful" on the Sabbath (2:24), first by exorcising a demon in the synagogue and now by healing a woman in the home of Simon and Andrew.¹¹

4. Some may point to this episode as "proof" the men are called to preach and evangelize, and women to serve in the background and support the men
 - a. First, there is no question each are called in different ways. Simon, Andrew, James, and John were called to follow Jesus in a way that Simon's mother-in-law was not. But we should keep in mind that neither were the rest of their families (as far as we know).
 - b. To point to this as "proof" of patriarchy or complementarianism is an exercise in missing the point. The cultural background was that a woman's honor was at least partially based on her ability to serve. Simon's mother-in-law, by becoming bed-ridden, could not even do the basics. The healing restored her honor. She served in the capacity that was most available to her.

Mark makes no consistent replacement of the patriarchal family with the Christian family. Instead, he relativizes and redefines domestic relations within the Christian

¹⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1574.

¹¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1816.

community. All relationships, even the most basic of parent and child or husband and wife, are secondary to the disciple's relationship to Jesus.¹²

5. The appropriate response to God's actions for us, is service
 - a. Not all are called to follow Jesus in the manner of the disciples
 - b. But all can and should respond through service

First Crowd

32 That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered together at the door. 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. (ESV)

1. With the close of the Sabbath, people can freely travel and accept healing and exorcisms without violating their laws

Apparently the people delayed their coming until the close of the Sabbath lest the day be infringed by the carrying of the sick or acts of healing when there was no immediate peril to life.¹³

2. People come because they have problems that need solving. It is not a gathering prompted by faith (which the next verses will imply)
 - a. Both popularity and the its lack can deceive
 - b. Faith and following Jesus is not about whether it is acceptable or not, popular or not – it may be, it may not be. It depends. Don't rely on externals for your decision.

Jesus' current celebrity does not jive with weakness and suffering and the ignominy of crucifixion. The people perceive only that he can banish suffering and evil. That the one who heals and casts out demons must die helplessly on a cross does not make any sense, nor does the implication that his followers must also suffer. When the reality of his mission becomes clear, the crowds will turn on him (14:43b; 15:6–14), and his disciples will desert him and flee (14:50).¹⁴

3. The theme of Jesus' hiddenness continues – the demons who try to reveal Jesus' identity are commanded to keep silent
 - a. Those who confess Jesus most loudly may sometimes actually be against God
 - b. Confession means nothing unless accompanied by Christ-imitating actions

¹² *Feasting: Mark*, location 1841.

¹³ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:32-33.

¹⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1735.

Our own conviction and our own belief system as well as the unclean spirits within us can sometimes lead us to recognize the Holy One of God. Yet we must examine ourselves to clarify what purpose our confession is serving.¹⁵

Summary

Today's section begins to provide details into what the gospel of God is, what it looks like when the kingdom of God invades the kingdom of Satan. It shows what repentance looks like. It shows that authority comes, not from hierarchies or ordination, but from relationship with the living God. So far this authority extends to those who he calls, over his own teaching, over demonic forces, and over disease. The Markan Jesus acts forcefully and with surprise.

Christian congregations tend to be composed of well-ordered folks who live well-ordered lives. For those averse to change, the Jesus we meet in Mark 1:16–20 [and truly, the entire gospel] can cause serious indigestion...¹⁶

I grew up in a sea of childhood civic Christianity that always preferred the polite "Christian" option rather than being engaged by the often impolite, living Lord. The Jesus I met in church was always well mannered, had encouraging words to say, especially to the children. He loved his mother, obeyed his father, performed marvelous miracles, and did not do anything that might disrupt decent and orderly church life. The Jesus whom preachers and congregations meet in Mark bears little resemblance to the civic Jesus of my childhood. He is not looking for allegiance or amazement; he is looking to turn us around, to shake us up, to make us become fishers for people adrift in the sea of casual faith or no faith at all...¹⁷

Here Jesus frees and liberates those who suffer, a paradigm of his wider work of salvation. All suggestions that the gospel is limited to "spiritual matters" or that the church should not be involved in ministries of healing and mental and physical relief are rejected on the basis of Jesus' healing miracles.¹⁸

This gives to the phrase "kingdom of God" a dynamic and material reality, making it far more than simply an ethical concept. As this scene shows, the kingdom (or reign) of God is God's power (authority) in action.¹⁹

Jesus had come to preach repentance and the nearness of the kingdom but the people think only of relief from pain and affliction. They fail to perceive the significance of Jesus' conflict with demonic power. In compassion and grace Jesus extends to them authentic healing, but it is not primarily for this purpose that he has come. In the morning he withdraws from the village and the clamoring crowds.²⁰

¹⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1597.

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1473.

¹⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1480.

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1544.

¹⁹ *UBC: Mark*, 1:21-28.

²⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:34.