

Mark – The First Gospel

004 – Signs of Conflict – Mark 1:35-2:12

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First Thoughts

We continue to journey with Jesus and his disciples in his first “ministry tour” of the Galilean region. We have witnessed the acclaim, though not faith, of the crowds in regards to Jesus. We have seen Mark move the setting from a synagogue to a house. The movement continues in the next set of three episodes.

In the first the setting moves back to the wilderness. We witness the first signs of conflict. By the end of this session we enter open conflict between Jesus and his critics. The third episode is a first in a series of five such conflict stories. In these stories we see how Mark shows Jesus continuing to undergo trials and temptations that began in the wilderness in 1:12-13.

The movement that began in Capernaum (1:21-28) goes into the wilderness, to the rest of Galilee, and then back to Capernaum (2:1-12). The crowds were amazed at the opening, and the crowd is amazed again at the end. We can see these two episodes in Capernaum as a kind of bookends for a unit. I see 2:1-12 as both a closing and an opening. This is further reinforced by a second disciple-calling that occurs in 2:13-14 (this will be a part of next session) that matches 1:16-20, and a mention of John the Baptist in 2:18-22 that recalls 1:14-15.

The previous session included the following as another way to structure part of the section we will examine today:

Table 1: 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)

Conflict Regarding Expectations

1:35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, 37 and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 And he said to them, "Let us go on to the

next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." 39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (ESV)

1. "Desolate place"
 - a. Actually, there were no literally "desolate" places near Capernaum¹
 - b. Thus the phrase is meant to be read symbolically
 - c. What is it symbolic of?
 - i. A time of "clarifying his identity in mission"²
 - ii. Temptation in the wilderness (1:12-13) and transfiguration (9:2-13)
 - iii. It may also be symbolic of the temptation that Jesus faces, to accept the acclaim of the crowds and acquiesce to their expectations³
2. Significance of prayer

In Mark's Gospel Jesus is seen in prayer only three times: at the beginning of the account, when his ministry is being defined (Ch. 1:35), in the middle after the feeding of the five thousand (Ch. 6:46), and near the conclusion when Jesus is in Gethsemane (Ch. 14:32-42). These three occasions have the character of a critical moment. The setting for Jesus' prayer in each instance is night and solitude...⁴

- a. When Jesus faces temptation to become part of the crowd, to give in to the "easy" way, to succumb to self-preservation, Mark shows that the appropriate response is prayer
- b. When the Roman Christians face temptation to succumb to self-preservation and abandon their faith, Mark tells them that they can find power to resist in the act of prayer
- c. When darkness and wilderness face Christians, the appropriate response is prayer

Our church folks need to hear about how Jesus faces and rejects the temptation to live for himself, rather than for God. They face these same temptations for fame and glory and power, which can corrupt even the most faithful.⁵

3. The disciples search for Jesus; the crowd looks for Jesus
 - a. In prayer, Jesus sought God
 - b. Is there a parallel here?
 - c. The people and disciples are seeking Jesus, but for all the wrong reasons
 - d. Jesus sought God for the source of his power and authority, for direction and purpose
 - e. The people sought Jesus for signs and wonders, but not for repentance

¹ NICNT: Mark, 1:35.

² Feasting: Mark, location 1908.

³ NICNT: Mark, 1:35.

⁴ NICNT: Mark, 1:35.

⁵ Feasting: Mark, location 1987.

They then try to convince Jesus to return to Capernaum. This statement represents the first, but not the last, attempt by the disciples to convince Jesus to follow their will, rather than his will.⁶

4. Jesus moves on

The crowds that gathered in Capernaum had made their decision, but it could not be the appropriate one because it involved not repentance but attraction to Jesus as a performer of miracles. That is why Jesus interrupts the miracles to go elsewhere to proclaim "the gospel of God." His purpose is not to heal as many people as possible as a manifestation of the kingdom of God drawn near in his person, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God's absolute claim upon their person.⁷

- a. The purpose of Jesus coming to this world is to incite judgment, i.e., to cause people to make a decision about the direction of their lives – repentance
 - b. Signs authenticate Jesus' power and authority, but they are not the primary purpose
 - c. *Moving on* is symbolic of the nature of Christian life
 - i. Especially for the immediate audience of this account
 - ii. The Christian life is not necessarily a settled one
 - iii. It might mean abandoning family, friends, homes, jobs, etc.
 - iv. Jesus identifies with this kind of uncertain living – but it is not the last word
- #### 5. Preaching in synagogues and casting out demons
- a. Jesus returns to synagogues during his tour of the region of Galilee
 - b. It is interesting that "casting out demons" takes place in association with synagogues
 - i. What people consider "sacred" can house "demons"?
 - c. In Mark, "demons" are more than literal demons
 - i. It is a power that holds people captive
 - ii. This power can include social and religious traditions and laws, as the next episodes will show
 - d. So it is quite appropriate that Mark tells of Jesus casting out demons in synagogues
 - e. Once again Mark's concept of proclamation includes both preaching and works

Maybe Jesus demonstrates another type of proclamation—one where the power is in the deed, rather than the word. Maybe Jesus reminds folks that their greatest testimonies are often unspoken, the greatest sermons include few words, as we testify to the love of Jesus by demonstrating that love.⁸

Mark's pairing of "proclaiming the message" with "casting out demons" in 1:39 serves as an important reminder that preaching and teaching can never be limited to words spoken or concepts understood intellectually.⁹

⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1975.

⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:36-39.

⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 1994.

⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2037.

Conflict Regarding Social Traditions

40 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity [σπλαγχνίζομαι, anger], he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." 42 And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, 44 and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." 45 But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. (ESV)

At one stage in the transmission of the final story in this panel the leprosy afflicting the man whom Jesus heals may have been thought of as a demon.¹⁰

1. Based on the chiasmic structure (Table 1, above) 1:40-45 matches the exorcism account of 1:21-27.
 - a. This perspective explains the "moved with anger" (v. 41), and "Jesus sternly charged him [the demon] and sent him [the demon] away at once" (v. 43)

The illnesses described in the miracle stories often refer to what the society demonizes or regards as God's punishment.¹¹

2. The other view, more commonly held, is that of "pity" or "compassion" (v. 41)
 - a. The "anger" may also be a part, but it is directed toward sin and its ravages in the form of disease and oppression¹²
 - b. More difficult to make sense of Jesus' attitude in v. 43
 - c. Explanation includes Jesus' exasperation at foreseeing the man disregarding Jesus' request to not reveal the source of healing¹³
3. What is leprosy, and how was it viewed?
 - a. It is not *Hansen's Disease*, though it would be included
 - b. A broad variety of skin conditions – diseased or not, contagious or not
 - c. It was viewed negatively, neutrally, and positively¹⁴
 - i. Positively in that it was thought to evacuate harmful materials out of the body
 - d. Technically, it did not mean total social ostracization

Lepers were allowed to live unhampered wherever they chose, except in Jerusalem and cities which had been walled from antiquity. They could even attend the synagogue services if a screen was provided to isolate them from the rest of the congregation.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Reading Mark*, 1:21- 27 (A) and 1:40- 45 (A').

¹¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2198.

¹² *NICNT: Mark*, 1:41-42.

¹³ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:43-44.

¹⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2217.

¹⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 1:40.

- e. But in practice it “brought deep physical and mental anguish for both the afflicted individual and the community in which or near which he lived”¹⁶

It is the social and ritual meanings attached to the condition more than the condition itself that Jesus must overcome.¹⁷

- f. Introduces difference between what God “wills” vs. what God is “able”
 - i. The leper has no question that Jesus is able – but does Jesus want to?
 - ii. At this point Mark does not provide any details other than that in this specific instance, it is God’s will for the leper to be clean
- g. Jesus violates social taboos against touching the unclean and impure
 - i. Rather than impurity transmitting to the clean, Jesus shows that it is holiness and purity that transmits onto the unclean

The point of mentioning this seems to be to show that Jesus not only healed the man but also established immediate social contact with him. In doing this, Jesus could be seen as actually violating the laws about ritual purity for the sake of healing the man.¹⁸

- h. Two interpretations regarding the leper’s response
 - i. That in his great joy and gratitude he forgot Jesus’ command and began to proclaim his healing from Jesus
 - ii. Mark is portraying yet another example of someone who experiences Jesus’ power but fails to show repentance
 - 1. This seems better suited to the context
 - 2. Jesus wanted the religious authorities to declare the man clean
 - a. Jesus could heal, but only the Law could declare clean
 - b. Thus showing the Law inferior to Jesus – the purity codes are obsolete in Jesus
 - c. The religious authorities would have condemned themselves – by declaring the man clean they would have validated Jesus’ authority and power

Jesus’ statement then means that if the priests establish that healing has taken place and accept the sacrifice for cleansing but fail to recognize the person and power through whom healing has come, they will stand condemned by the very evidence which they have supplied.¹⁹

- 3. Jesus’ activities became limited as a result

¹⁶ NICNT: Mark, 1:40.

¹⁷ Feasting: Mark, location 2221.

¹⁸ UBC: Mark, 1:40-45.

¹⁹ NICNT: Mark, 1:43-44.

- a. As the next story will show more directly, crowds are generally a negative thing in the Markan account. They never repent and they prevent people from coming to Jesus.²⁰
- i. The setting ends with a return to the “wilderness”
 - i. There is much work done today to bring people into the church from “the wilderness,” but perhaps this episode is telling us that Christians ought to go out into the wilderness for ministry, away from distractions of maintaining and pleasing an organization.
 - ii. At the very least it tells us that there is no specifically designated “sacred space”

Conflict Regarding Religious Traditions

2:1 And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. 3 And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. 5 And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7 "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 8 And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" —he said to the paralytic— 11 "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home." 12 And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (ESV)

Here the audience begins to get a sense for what is at stake in the proclamation and activity of Jesus. The reign of God will not be welcomed by everyone. If the reign of God has drawn near, that means that all other regnant structures are radically relativized and soon to be eliminated... In order for God to reign, all other powers must abdicate or be defeated, even the powers that claim to represent God. In Mark, not only Rome, but also the Jewish leaders stand to lose when Jesus announces God's reign, so they oppose Jesus.²¹

According to John Donahue and Daniel Harrington, Mark employs it [2:1-12] as the first part of a five-part ring of stories, set in Capernaum, that ends with Jesus' healing of the man with the withered hand in a synagogue in 3:1-6. The ring's center, which is found in 2:18-22, focuses on fasting, the bridegroom, and newness.²²

²⁰ *Exploring Mark*, p. 66.

²¹ *Reading Mark*, "Controversies - 2:1-3:6"

²² *Feasting: Mark*, location 2315.

Reading Mark provides the following chiastic outline for 2:1-3:6 –

Table 2: Chiastic form and related elements, Reading Mark, "Controversies - 2:1-3:6"

A: (2:1-12) Healing of paralytic	B: (2:15-17) Controversy over eating	C: (2:18-22) Controversy over fasting	B': (2:23-28) Controversy over eating	A': (3:1-6) Healing of withered hand
Indoor scene: house (2:1)	Indoor scene: house (2:15a)		Outdoor scene (2:23a)	Indoor scene: synagogue (3:1)
Controversy apophthegm ²³ imbedded in healing miracle	Jesus and his disciples eat with the wrong people. (2:15b)	Controversy apophthegm about fasting (2:18-19)	Disciples "harvest" food on sabbath; David and his followers eat the "wrong" bread. (2:23- 26)	Controversy apophthegm imbedded in a healing miracle
"rise" (2:9), "rise" (2:11), "he rose" (2:12)	Proverb: "The strong don't need a doctor, but the sick do." (2:17a)	Oblique reference to crucifixion: bridegroom taken away (2:20)	Proverb: "The sabbath was made for <i>anthropon</i> , not <i>anthropos</i> for the sabbath" (2:27)	"rise up to the midst" (3:3)
Positive response: "They were all ecstatic and glorified God, saying, 'We never saw anything like this before!'" (2:12)	Christological saying: "I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." (2:17b)	Two sayings on new vs. old (2:21-22)	Christological saying: "The <i>huios tou anthropou</i> is Lord even of the sabbath." (2:28).	Negative response: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." (3:6)
Link word to next story: sins	Link word to previous story: sinners		Link word to next story: sabbath	Link word to previous story: sabbath

1. A return from the wilderness back to Capernaum, into "his home"
 - a. Probably Peter's mother-in-law's home as in 1:29
 - b. A typical home might possibly hold fifty, packed in
 - c. Jesus tries to keep his arrival quiet but the news spreads
 - d. A crowd gathers, preventing access to Jesus (c.f., 1:45 and 3.h.ii.3.a)
 - e. Jesus' primary mission is to proclaim the gospel – Mark wants his audience to recognize that miracles are not Jesus' primary mission
2. This story is present in the other Synoptics (Matthew 9:2-8 and Luke 5:18-26)
3. What is this story communicating? What is Mark trying to tell his audience?
 - a. Jesus' authority to forgive sins – interpretations are pretty much unified on this point

²³ *Apophthegm*: a British variant of *apothegm*: a short, pithy, and instructive saying or formulation (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apothegm>)

The scene in 2:1–12 is also a ring in itself. Joel Marcus breaks it into five parts, centering on the controversy over forgiveness. The point of the scene, if we accept Marcus's arrangement, is that Jesus has the authority to forgive.²⁴

- b. Controversy between what religion holds as true vs. what is God's reality – interpretations also unified here
- c. But some points of contention between interpretations –
 - i. Whose faith did Jesus see? The four men or the four men and the paralytic?
 - 1. The story has sometimes been interpreted as the paralytic not having faith so the four make up for the paralytic lack of faith
 - ii. Is Jesus' forgiveness speaking directly to some specific sin in the paralytic's life?
 - 1. A cursory, literal reading could be seen this way and sermons have been based on this premise
 - iii. Is Jesus' forgiveness speaking to a specific guilt felt by the paralytic?
 - 1. As with previous
 - iv. Are the scribes questioning Jesus' identity? Do they fear he might be God?
 - 1. This is often seen as the scribes getting an inkling, at least, of the true identity of Jesus, but is it really?
 - v. Verse 10 is problematic
 - 1. It is often put into quotes, i.e., Jesus said it
 - 2. But why would he speak of himself as "Son of Man" when up to this point he has tried to hide his identity and will continue to do so?
 - vi. The crowd is amazed and glorifies God
 - 1. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
- d. Whose faith? And what sin? What guilt?
 - i. The interpretation that the paralytic is lacking in faith is premised on the interpretation that the paralytic is suffering from a specific, personal sin for which he is suffering guilt such that he feels personally cut-off from God
 - ii. But does the text support this premise? It does not.
 - iii. Here are a list of quotations from a couple commentaries supporting the interpretation that Jesus is speaking not about the paralytic's personal sin and guilt, but his challenge to the general theology of the time that attributed diseases to specific sins

Healing is a gracious movement of God into the sphere of withering and decay which are the tokens of death at work in a man's life... Sickness, disease and death are the consequence of the sinful condition of all men. Consequently every healing is a driving back of death and an invasion of the province of sin. That is why it is appropriate for Jesus to proclaim the remission of sins. It is unnecessary to think of a corresponding sin for each instance of sickness; there is no suggestion in the narrative that the paralytic's physical suffering was related to a specific sin or was due to hysteria induced by guilt.

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2321.

Jesus' pronouncement of pardon is the recognition that man can be genuinely whole only when the breach occasioned by sin has been healed through God's forgiveness of sins.²⁵

The story neither names a specific sin committed by the paralytic nor mentions anything at all about guilt; there is no specific connection between sin and sickness. Jesus does not say that sin causes the paralysis. It may be helpful here to look beyond what Jesus says ("Son, your sins are forgiven," v. 5b) to what Jesus does.²⁶

Jesus does not ask where the illness comes from or who has caused it. It is not about guilt or an explanation! What is crucial is that in the presence and actions of Jesus, sin and illness lose their power.²⁷

Black joins a number of other scholars in pointing out that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between sin and sickness suggested in this biblical text. While Jesus does tell the paralytic that his sins are forgiven, he never once implies that he is sick because he sinned.²⁸

- e. The problem of Jesus' identity and "Son of Man"
 - i. Verse 10 is Mark's commentary – he is interrupting the story and telling his audience that Jesus has authority to forgive sins
 - ii. OT prophets were sometimes known to declare forgiveness of sins (e.g., Nathan, 2 Sam. 12:13)
 - iii. The forgiveness of sins was not attributed to the Jewish expectations of a Messiah²⁹
 - iv. Verse 5 is ambiguous: it does not have to be interpreted as Jesus personally forgiving sin; it is merely a declaration
 - v. Therefore, it is best in this context to continue to understand that the scribes are properly responding to the declaration. They only see Jesus as another human.

The reaction of the scribes does not imply that they have understood otherwise. They object to Jesus' conviction that he can speak for God. Jesus did exercise the divine prerogative but in a veiled way that could be recognized unambiguously only after the resurrection.³⁰

- f. *All* are amazed and glorify God
 - i. The crowd, the disciples, and the scribes
 - ii. But amazement is not necessarily a good thing – it does not indicate repentance, which is what Jesus wants to see

²⁵ NICNT: *Mark*, 2:3-5.

²⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2381.

²⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2439.

²⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2468.

²⁹ NICNT: *Mark*, 2:6-7.

³⁰ NICNT: *Mark*, 2:6-7.

- iii. They even glorify God, but there is no sign of repentance (except perhaps the former paralytic and possibly his four friends)
- 4. Jesus demonstrates authority to forgive by alleviating suffering – physical and emotional
 - a. Jesus demonstrates a parable of the power of his future resurrection
 - b. Forgiveness brings and restores life to a community

... One can see that this story is about the house meeting—that is, the early Christian liturgy—as a locus of forgiveness. That is to say, this episode calls upon the assembly to forgive.³¹

- 5. What about the broken roof?

Mark's story implies that when Jesus is home, the house itself is vulnerable to the collateral damage of those who relentlessly seek him, his healing, and his forgiveness. The word is a word to the church.³²

Perhaps the roof in Mark 2 is a way of keeping the Other at bay. The walls and roof of a house are designed to keep out anything unwanted. Yet this house is special, because Jesus is visiting it. He has shown up at the meeting in the house, and therefore the purpose of this house meeting is forgiveness, and if those who need forgiveness cannot fit through the door, they might just have to tear a hole in the roof. Suddenly the barrier is gone, and those inside must acknowledge those outside.³³

Summary

Jesus moves about overturning traditional ideas about society and religion. He very intentionally tries to (albeit unsuccessfully) keep his evangelism efforts small and contained. He proclaims with both word and deed. So far when “sin” is mentioned, it has more to do with societal, systematic opposition than with individual, personal offenses and guilt. Jesus is in the work of restoring the entire community, not just individuals, to right relationships. Anything that gets in the way of people approaching Jesus is considered a negative, and perhaps even a “demon” that must be exorcised. Such work inevitably invites conflict.

³¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2324.

³² *Feasting: Mark*, location 2329.

³³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 2340.