

Mark – The First Gospel

006 –Mixed Reactions– Mark 3:1-19

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

First Thoughts

This section of Mark includes the final conflict story of Jesus' opening gospel tour around the region of Galilee. It is followed by another story of the crowd which serves as a summary of the results of the opening tour. It ends with the appointment of the Twelve, which I see as going both ways: it echoes the initial calling but serves as an introduction to a series of stories about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry began in the wilderness, moved into town, the synagogue, into a house, back into the wilderness, and a repetition of sorts. The final conflict story comes back to a synagogue after which Jesus tries to withdraw once more to the wilderness (the sea).

Healing and Killing

3:1 Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. 2 And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. 3 And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." 4 And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. 5 And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (ESV)

1. Return to a synagogue
 - a. Doesn't say where, but likely to be Capernaum
 - b. Notice contrast in response to Jesus from the first synagogue appearance (1:21-28)
 - i. The attendees don't say anything this time vs. acclaim the first time
 - ii. The Pharisees are out to challenge Jesus vs. no challenge the first time
 - iii. Response is to seek to destroy Jesus vs. no such thing the first time
2. Man with a withered hand
 - a. Whatever this was, in practical matters, the hand was unusable, meaning he could not work
 - b. It also meant that he was physically deformed meaning he was disqualified from full participation in Jewish religion
 - c. Was he a plant by the Pharisees?
 - i. Maybe, maybe not – if he was, most likely an unwilling participant
 - ii. Whatever the reason, they are actively seeking to find a case against Jesus

- d. Note that nothing is given about the spiritual condition of this man
 - i. Nothing is said about whether or not he has faith or wants to be healed
 - ii. In this story it is entirely Jesus' initiative to heal
 - iii. There is nothing said about the man's response to his healing
- 3. "Come here" (ESV), "Come up here where we can see you" (CJB), "Step up where people can see you" (CEB)
 - a. Jesus could have healed in quiet – but he chooses to make it a very public event
 - b. Jesus could have waited until after the Sabbath, but chooses to heal during a Sabbath synagogue service
 - c. The proclamation of God's acts of deliverance are meant to be public testimonies
- 4. No middle ground
 - a. Good or harm, save or kill
 - b. The kingdom of God is about good and saving
 - c. To not act is to condone harming and killing
 - d. The center of God's worship ought to be the place where good and saving is most experienced
- 5. "They were silent"
 - a. No one says anything
 - i. The attendees are silenced by intimidation from the "authorities"¹
 - b. Jesus issues an honor challenge, but they do not respond

When Jesus heals the man with the withered hand, he is hurling an honor challenge at the Pharisees. The second silence reflects their response to the honor challenge. One who is challenged must decide how to respond. If he judges that the challenger is close enough in social standing to accept the challenge without loss of prestige and social standing, the riposte begins with no holds barred. If, however, the person or group deems the challenge beneath their dignity, they can reject the challenge with a put-down that shames the challenger(s). The ultimate put-down is to snub the challenger with silence and act as though the challenge never occurred.²

- 6. "He looked around at them with anger"
 - a. Only place in the entire Bible where Jesus is described as angry³
 - b. So intent on protecting religion and traditions that they fail to consider compassion

Doing good, caring for neighbor, trumps all regulations. What does that say to us today, whether we protest rules and regulations within the life of the church, or advocate for change in culture and politics? What trumps what? What priorities matter? Jesus' fierce testimony silences the critics. Either they have decided already and do not seek debate, or they have nothing to say—

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3175.

² *Feasting: Mark*, location 3189.

³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3223. *UBC: Mark*, notes for 3:5.

or both. Either way, their silence both angers and saddens Jesus. Again, to what suffering and injustice is the church silent today?⁴

7. Jesus heals

- a. A foreshadowing of the power of the resurrection that is to come⁵
- b. Jesus does no actual “work” in healing – so did he really “break” the Law?
- c. Healing is not the central issue of this story
 - i. The issue is what does God want? Following the Law, or showing compassion?

In their concern for legal detail they had forgotten the mercy and grace shown by God to man when he made provision for the Sabbath. In the name of piety they had become insensitive both to the purposes of God and to the sufferings of men.⁶

8. The Pharisees go out to plot Jesus’ death

- a. Irony: they plot to kill on the Sabbath – killing is forbidden on all days
- b. They literally want to cause Jesus to disappear

Ironically, the guardians of the Sabbath determine to do harm and to kill. The decision points forward to the Passion, but it also contains the seed of self-destruction. The rejection of Jesus entails the rejection of life and redemption and leaves men prey to distress and death. This is the bitter fruit of that hardness of heart which provoked in Jesus both anger and godly sorrow.⁷

9. We need to picture ourselves as each of the three players

- a. How are we like the man with the withered hand?
 - i. Caught between powers, unable to help ourselves, shunned, ostracized...
- b. How are we like the Pharisees?
 - i. Holding on to traditions, seeking to maintain order and control, threatened by changes, prioritizing law and authority
- c. How are we like Jesus?
 - i. Prioritizing compassion over law, challenging establishment, unafraid to speak out and act against traditions and laws

10. At the same time, some warnings

Preaching Jesus’ compassion as law misses the point of God’s love for all people.⁸

Even when we are arguing about doing good, we always manage to be in control.⁹

⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3082.

⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3202.

⁶ *NICNT: Mark*, 3:5.

⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 3:6.

⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3168.

⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3258.

Summary of Jesus' First Tour

7 Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea 8 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. 9 And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, 10 for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. 11 And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." 12 And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.
(ESV)

1. Motifs from the opening scenes: withdrawal, sea, disciples, crowd, healing, exorcism, demons declaring Jesus' title, command to keep silent about Jesus' identity
2. Why does Jesus go to the sea?
 - a. Opposition in populated areas and synagogues have become too great
 - b. Not fear but prudence – Jesus' work is not yet finished

It is unfortunate that some of Christ's followers haven't learned the lesson of prudence. They act as if every hill is one to die on and create nothing but dissension in the church and often in their families... Some of us have yet to grasp the fact that there is a time to retreat as well as a time to advance.¹⁰

3. What is new: tales of Jesus have spread beyond Galilee, and people arrive from a very large geographical region
 - a. Conspicuously absent: Samaria, which is closer than some of the other named areas
4. No mention of faith or repentance on the part of the crowd
 - a. Jesus heals and exorcises of his own initiative, based on his own compassion
 - b. The crowds appear to see Jesus as wonder-worker and not much more
 - c. Jesus asks for nothing in return
5. Why does Jesus heal and exorcise when the people do not respond appropriately?
 - a. It is about compassion

Jesus' compassion is not merely a feeling of pity; his compassion focuses on wholeness and justice on behalf of those in need. Real compassion entails actually getting to know people, understanding their needs and concerns, and sharing resources even at personal cost. Compassion may also mean shared suffering.¹¹

6. It is about demonstrating what the Kingdom looks like

¹⁰ *Exploring Mark*, p. 83.

¹¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3340.

Healing carried great weight in a society that viewed illness as punishment from heaven. The healings set off a chain reaction as word spread among the villagers of Galilee. Remember that healing touched more than the individual; it restored the family and kinship relations.¹²

6. The wilderness/sea is a place of temptation and testing, where Jesus is confronted each time with a decision to follow God's will (repentance) or to succumb to self-preservation (sin)
 - a. The demons confront him and try to control him
 - b. The crowds give him acclaim
7. Jesus is becoming a real threat to the established power structures
 - a. Hence the Pharisees and Herodians (3:6) seek to destroy Jesus

We are to know as well that Jesus is a threat not only to the practice of organized religion but also to any established authority, period.¹³

8. The Kingdom and the presence of the Divine is no longer to be understood as fixed (i.e., Temple)
 - a. Wherever Jesus is, there the Kingdom is
 - b. Wherever a community continues the work of Jesus' compassion, there the Kingdom is

Everything that has occurred between these two summaries has interpreted the meaning of the "good news of God" and the "kingdom" that "is at hand," as well as the appropriate response, "repent and believe."¹⁴

Appointment of the Twelve

13 And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. 14 And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach 15 and have authority to cast out demons. 16 He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); 17 James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); 18 Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, 19 and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (ESV)

Table 1: Chiastic structure, Mark 3:13-6:13, 30 (Reading Mark)

A- Disciples appointed (3:13-19)

B- Misinterpretation by family and religious leaders (3:20-35)

C- Jesus' words and deeds heard and seen but not understood (4:1-5:43)

Words (4:1-34)

Deeds (4:35-5:43)

B'- Misinterpretation by associates in home town (6:1-6)

A'- Disciples sent out (6:7-13, 30)

¹² Feasting: Mark, location 3404.

¹³ Feasting: Mark, location 3302.

¹⁴ Feasting: Mark, location 3369.

1. This section echoes earlier “call” passages (1:16-20, 2:14)
2. Mountains – a place where divine encounters and revelations were thought to occur¹⁵
3. This section reveals more details about what discipleship involves
 - a. To be with Jesus – this is the first and most important step

It is impossible to overestimate the importance for Christian formation of community life that is centered on the presence of Jesus. To counteract today's individualistic and activist construals of discipleship, Christocentric community life is essential, though extraordinarily hard to find.¹⁶

- b. To imitate Jesus (1:39)
 - i. To preach/proclaim
 - ii. To cast out demons

... Their mission, like that of Jesus, is to include both proclamation and action. Neither is optional, and one may not be substituted for the other. It should also be noticed that they are given no "apostolic" authority over other followers of Jesus (Best 1978, 33). They may give orders to demons, but not to people (10:43- 44).¹⁷

4. “The twelve”
 - a. Problem: names and order vary between gospel accounts
 - i. Perhaps the same twelve across all the accounts, but some had multiple names by which they were known¹⁸
 - ii. Perhaps the number 12 was important for symbolic reasons (e.g., the new Israel), but not necessarily its composition; i.e., different disciples composed “the twelve”¹⁹
 - b. Were “the twelve” selected from a larger group of disciples?
 - i. No, says *NICNT*²⁰
 - ii. Yes, says *Reading Mark* and *Exploring Mark*²¹
 - c. Were “the twelve” more privileged than other followers of Jesus?
 - i. Yes, says *NICNT* and *Exploring Mark*²²
 - ii. No, says *Reading Mark*²³
5. Judas Iscariot

¹⁵ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19.

¹⁶ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19.

¹⁷ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19.

¹⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, 3:13-15, 16-19a

¹⁹ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19. *Exploring Mark*, p. 84.

²⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, 3:13-15.

²¹ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19. *Exploring Mark*, p. 84.

²² *NICNT: Mark*, 3:16-19a. *Exploring Mark*, p. 85.

²³ *Reading Mark*, 3:13-19.

- a. He is clearly depicted as someone Jesus wanted and called
- b. He is identified as the betrayer, but in some sense, every single disciple betrayed Jesus
- c. A reminder that even Jesus' hand-picked group would have problems

In whatever way Christians may theologize about Judas, then and now—predestined pawn, kingdom-hastening agent, mistaken militant, would-be powerbroker—even the earliest apostolic community included the presence and the reality of the demonic, a timely reminder for those who would attribute some mythic purity to the first-century church.²⁴

Summary

The gospel of Jesus elicits two opposing responses among those who hear and experience it. One is repulsion; the other is attraction. To those invested in the status quo, the gospel is something that must be rejected and even destroyed. To those who are outside of established systems of power and authority, the gospel is intriguing and attractive. But mere attraction is not enough. The gospel calls for a response of repentance and discipleship, to join in the work of the Kingdom of God.

In these first few couple chapters of *Mark* we have seen brief examples of what gospel proclamation looks like. It involves both words and action. The gospel heals all manner of disease and brokenness and restores wholeness. All manner of demonic powers that hold people captive are exorcised. Jesus' disciples are called to watch and listen, and then follow his example.

But we do not yet reside in the fullness of the Kingdom. Thus the community that we call the Church is not perfect; it has many faults. Even Jesus' hand-picked group included one that would deliver him up to death. It is a reminder for us to not despair when things seem to go so wrong in our local congregations, and with the greater collection of churches throughout the world. As imperfect as we all are, God is still able to work through us and bring about his purposes.²⁵

Jesus certainly is not going to tone down his expectations of what human beings can accomplish through the empowering Spirit of the living God. At the same time, Mark is a realist about human nature. He knows that just because Christ "called to him those whom he wanted" (v. 13), there is no guarantee they will fulfill their Lord's great expectations...

Christ has great expectations of us and has no intention of lessening them. We disciples often fail to meet them, but that is no reason for despair, because all things are possible for God.²⁶

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 3506.

²⁵ C.f., *Exploring Mark*, p. 86. "[The Church] has always had its Judases, even in the ministry. But God doesn't forsake it. Rather, He works with it in spite of itself."

²⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 3649, 3654.