

MARK 2-5

Mark 2

2:1-12

Although Jesus is able to avoid the crowds for a moment, He is discovered after His entry into Capernaum and swarmed to the point that the house is totally surrounded. Such a sight would have surely been disappointing for the four people carrying a sick friend, but they show unusual perseverance and single-minded determination. After digging through the roof—probably not endearing themselves to the homeowner—they are finally able to place their friend at his intended destination: the side of Jesus.

That Jesus “saw” their faith—not normally something considered visible—could point either to His superhuman abilities or the fact that their faith is evident through their actions. In either case, He turns His attention not to healing but to granting forgiveness. This underscores an important priority: while Jesus will continue to teach and heal, He has come, above all, to provide forgiveness for sin.

Jesus’s declaration of forgiveness enrages some of the scribes present, who rightly note that “God only” has the authority to forgive sin. The irony, of course, is that while they are correct in this understanding, they do not realize that Jesus is divine. Perceiving their thoughts—another divine act—Jesus demonstrates His authority through a miracle. It is one thing to speak of one’s divinity; it is quite another to make it evident through action.

2:13-17

This story is paralleled in Luke, but in the Gospel of Matthew the tax collector is named Matthew, not Levi. Tradition has identified the two as the same figure. In any case, Mark’s interest is not in the identity of the figure but in the fact that Jesus would call a tax collector, a class traditionally despised by others, as a disciple.

The Pharisees (a title likely derived from a Hebrew root meaning “to separate”) were a Jewish sectarian group focused on the observance of purity rules, which often meant separation from certain elements in wider society. Thus, we see their disturbance at Jesus mixing with a crowd including “publicans and sinners.”

Jesus’s response suggests that the Pharisees’ efforts are pointed in the wrong direction. The responsibility of the righteous is not to abandon the sinful but rather to shepherd them. While the Pharisees are worried about the negative effect that associating with sinners may have on them, Jesus is concerned about the positive effect that He may have on the sinners.

2:18–20

As fasting was anciently understood as a sign of mourning, the point of Jesus’s response seems to be that the time for mourning has not yet arrived. Eventually, the time would be appropriate for fasting, but not during the duration of Jesus’s ministry. The word “taken away” (Greek *apairō*) suggests violence, making this Jesus’s first—albeit subtle—reference in Mark to His coming death. The days of gloom and uncertainty between the death and Resurrection of Jesus would certainly be appropriate for mourning and fasting.

2:21–22

The two illustrations that Jesus uses—mending cloth and bottling wine—demonstrate Jesus’s transformative role. He shrugs off any assertion that He is a mere reformer. He has not come to patch the seams or rebottle the religiosity of His day but to transform it. The doctrine and salvation that Jesus offers cannot be diluted by seeking to harmonize it with the traditions of the day. These analogies, like many of His future parables, draw on the experiences of domestic and rural life, thus relating His teachings to the experience of women and the rural poor.

2:23–28

Since in older English usage *corn* meant simply “grain,” we should not picture corn fields of American maize but instead should envision fields of wheat or barley. Theft is not an issue here, as the law of Moses permits travelers to pluck from the fields of another in passing (Deuteronomy 23:24–25). Instead, the Pharisees’ concern is that the disciples’ action constitutes threshing and winnowing, which would violate the Sabbath.

Jesus’s answer sidesteps the potential violation, as He sarcastically asks the Pharisees if they have ever read the story of David (the Greek anticipates a positive answer—of course they have read this story!). In a time of extreme need David and his associates, who were fugitives at this time from King Saul, came to the tabernacle and requested food (1 Samuel 21:1–6). The only food on hand was the holy shewbread, which was placed in the tabernacle for a week as an offering to the Lord and afterward was to be eaten only by the priests. The priest Ahimelech, recognizing that something important was at stake, allowed David and his party to eat the shewbread.

While this story does not address the Sabbath, it demonstrates that the preservation of human life supersedes the bounds of normal rule. This is reinforced by the following claim that “the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.” Human life, its preservation, and the attainment of its potential is the goal of divine law. Jesus is also implicitly claiming to be at least as important as David, King of Israel, and claims the title “Lord of Sabbath.”

One final item of note is the reference to “the days of Abiathar the high priest.” While Abiathar would eventually serve as high priest, he was *not* the high priest at the time of this episode involving David—his father Ahimelech was. It seems reasonable to conclude that the mistake is Mark’s and not Jesus’s. This small error should not cause us to lose confidence in Mark’s otherwise reliable narration.

Mark 3

3:1–6

The Sabbath theme of Mark 2:23–28 is further developed in these verses. Since “withered” is a figurative description, it is not possible to tell what sort of ailment the man was suffering from. Those present are familiar with Jesus, and they expect that He may perform a healing. Jesus is the only active character in this story, and He initiates the confrontation with His question, which points to the crux of the matter: what is the appropriate use of the Sabbath? Jesus frames His question in terms of life and death, which were common starting points for legal debates on appropriate Sabbath activity. “To save life” likely has reference to the healings He has and will perform; “to kill” probably refers to the observers’ intent to “accuse him” of Sabbath violation, which was considered a capital crime, especially after a warning has been given—as it was in Mark 2:23–28. Probably sensing their dilemma, the accusers remain quiet.

Jesus has chosen to make an example out of this healing and does so in a very public way, and His opponents are predictably angry and embarrassed. While little is known about the Herodians, Herod the Great was no friend of the Pharisees. This makes their partnership all the more shocking and demonstrates the lengths to which both parties were willing to go to destroy Jesus. “Straightway” plotting Jesus’s death, they begin to “do evil,” even “to kill” on the Sabbath. For the first time in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’s life is sought by His opponents.

3:7–12

Despite the growing opposition to Jesus, His popularity, for the time being, continues to outpace His opposition. Once again, demons declare Jesus as the Son of God—unlike most of the mortal characters in the story—but Jesus does not allow them to reveal that knowledge. The demons’ knowledge does them no good (see James 2:19). Perhaps Jesus intends for His disciples to come to an understanding of who He is in a way that will induce faith. These verses recount the results of the events of the previous chapters and anticipate those to come, serving as a bridge between narratives.

3:13–19

The act of ascending a mountain recalls Sinai, where Moses was summoned to the presence of God. Some disciples are now summoned to Jesus's presence. Whereas crowds have chosen to mob Jesus, now *He* chooses (this phrase is emphatic in Greek) twelve to follow him. The word translated as “ordain” (Greek *poieō*) is more ambiguous than a ritual of priesthood being conferred through the laying on of hands, although this is certainly a possible meaning. Each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) notes in its list of the Twelve that Judas will betray Jesus—yet another foreshadowing of events to come.

3:20–35

Jesus and the Twelve are mobbed immediately upon their return to the city. All this attention leads to Jesus's “friends” (but more likely his family; Greek *hoi par' autou*) trying to put a stop to this overly public ministry. The opposition grows louder when scribes arrive from Jerusalem, declaring that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebub (a transliteration of a Hebrew term meaning “Lord of the flies,” an epithet for the devil). This seems to be an attempt to explain His miraculous powers while reconciling them with His supposed disregard for the law. Jesus's words about a house divided call into question the logical consistency of the scribes' argument. They may also foreshadow His own death since His family, or house, is now divided against Him.

Blasphemy was a capital crime under the law of Moses, and so Jesus's offer of forgiveness is astounding. However, His main point is the greater seriousness of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. In response to the people's assertion that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebub or an unclean spirit, He seems to be claiming that he casts out demons by the power of the Holy Ghost and warning of the eternal dangers of attributing God's work to the devil.

Mark closes the account by bookending the scribes' accusation with another family incident (Mark often sandwiches narratives by enclosing them within a larger story). The implication of Jesus's family “standing without” is that crowds have become so unmanageable that they cannot even reach Jesus. Many early texts also add “sisters” to verse 32, indicating that Jesus's entire family has come to see Him (sans Joseph, who may have died by this point). It's unclear what the purpose of their visit is.

Jesus sees a teaching opportunity in the situation and redefines His family as those who follow Him. The qualifications for this new familial relationship are not biological but rather are based on obedience to God. This is not to degrade the value of the actual family relationship but to demonstrate that the relationship with God and obedience to His will should supersede all others.

Mark 4

4:1–20

The term “parable” comes from the Greek *paraballō*, “to throw alongside,” indicating that two elements are placed next to each other to invite comparison. In Jewish contexts, the term came to indicate a hidden

or esoteric meaning. This sense is certainly present in Jesus's parables, which contain several layers of deep meaning beyond the surface-level story. This makes parables a very useful method of teaching: listeners glean as much truth from the story as they are prepared to receive. Parables also tend to be easier to remember than sermons, making them valuable for an oral tradition.

While we have come to call this parable the parable of the sower, the story's message is more about the different soils than the sower. The agrarian images of this parable would have been familiar to Jesus's audience, even if they were not farmers themselves. Jesus gives His own interpretation of the parable, which can provide a model for interpreting the other parables in the chapter.

Jesus explains His reason for using parables with a quotation, in verse 12, from Isaiah 6 that may seem troubling. However, it's possible that the effect mentioned at the end of verse 12 is the natural result of Jesus's teaching, not the intent of it. Note that in Jesus's description of the four types of soil (and of the four types of people), the soils gradually grow more productive and receptive to the word. The emphasis is not on the sower, whose identity Jesus never elaborates, but on the soil, inviting us to consider which type of soil we might compare ourselves to.

4:21–25

While Mark does not preserve as much of Jesus's teachings as do the other Synoptics (Matthew and Luke) since it is more interested in the miracle stories, these verses contain nuggets of Jesus's instruction. The candle metaphor contrasts strongly with the previous verses, which describe the lack of understanding that will result from the parables. While many elements of Jesus's mission remain "hid," eventually they will all be revealed in their full glory.

Jesus also issues a brief admonition for the people to give heed to the things they hear. Those who do will have more given to them. Those who do not will lose what they had already obtained. We may recall the words of Alma here: "They that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; . . . this is what is meant by the chains of hell" (Alma 12:11).

4:26–29

Once again, the emphasis is not on the sower but this time on the seed. The parable emphasizes God's power: seeds grow into plants independently, and humans insert themselves into the cycle, systemize it, and become dependent on it, yet all the while "know[ing] not how" it all works. We are reminded of Paul's words, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6), and of Alma's observation that the seed (the word) will begin to grow spontaneously within the believer if it is allowed to take root (Alma 32:28).

4:30–32

Mustard grows wild as a weed in the land of Israel, so there is probably something humorous in Jesus's image of it being "sown in the earth"—as is so often the case in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus will subvert our

expectations. The parable itself is full of hyperbole: Mustard seeds are indeed small, but they are not the smallest of all seeds. Nor does mustard grow into a massive tree; rather, it becomes a large shrub or small tree. But the point of emphasis is the contrast, that something so small can become something so large. Wild birds are sometimes used in the Old Testament to symbolize gentile nations, which may have some significance for the interpretation of verse 32. Jesus is teaching that mighty things may come from small, humble beginnings.

4:33–34

Although Mark will not record many more of Jesus’s parables, he makes it clear here that Jesus taught frequently through parables. “As they were able to hear it” indicates that there was some variance in the understanding of his message—just as one would expect based on the parable of the sower. The disciples, however, receive further instruction in private.

4:35–41

The Greek indicates that the disciples’ question in verse 38 is rhetorical—they expect a yes answer to their rude but understandably desperate question. But as so often happens in Mark, Jesus does not respond to the question directly but takes direct action. His calming of the storm answers their question more forcefully than any words could have done.

There are many, almost certainly deliberate, similarities between this narrative and the story of Jonah. The points of similarity as well as the points of contrast offer valuable insights. Like Jonah, Jesus is asleep during the storm, but unlike Jonah’s case, in which the storm was a result of Jonah’s sinfulness, the storm here is not brought about by sinfulness on Jesus’s part. Jonah’s act of self-sacrifice foreshadows Jesus’s own sacrifice. Unlike Jonah, Jesus is able to calm the storm with only words—demonstrating His great power.

The sea is always a place of chaos and terror in the Old Testament, and yet God holds power over it. This episode demonstrates that Jesus holds the same power as Jehovah over the sea. Sleeping soundly through the storm, He is unlike His disciples, who are utterly consumed by terror. They are not-so-subtly reminded that Jesus is not like the rest of them—He holds unique power and foresight.

Mark 5

5:1–20

The motivation for Jesus’s trip across the sea—into gentile territory—is unclear. Perhaps it was for the specific purpose of healing this man. Themes of death and uncleanness occur and recur throughout this narrative, which emphasize Jesus’s eventual triumph over them. It appears that the local residents have given up trying to restrain the man and allow him to be confined to the area around the tombs. Since the word translated as “worshipped” (Greek *proskyneō*) may connote nothing more than bowing down,

it's unclear if this action was motivated by the demons or by some part of the man's mind still under his control. The man's words are similar to those of the demons Jesus has encountered previously, although "Son of the most high God" is more appropriate to this gentile context.

A Roman legion consisted of about five thousand men, and whether or not this number is symbolic, it appears Jesus must contend with an entire army of demons. But even with this numerical advantage, the demons realize that they are powerless to resist Jesus and request permission to enter a large group of pigs nearby—another marker of uncleanness and the gentile nature of the territory. Interestingly, Jesus does not actively expel them but passively allows them to leave the man (Greek *epitrepō*).

As with the action of the man above, we cannot tell if the action of the pigs is compelled by the demons themselves or by the pigs' desire to be free of them. In either case, it is clear that the demons are agents of chaos and destruction, and the man's miraculous freedom from them should be celebrated. Unfortunately, the local residents seem more concerned with the loss of the pigs than the recovery of the man and would rather see Jesus gone. It is perhaps because he senses his own continued marginalization that the healed man asks to go with Jesus, but Jesus recognizes that he will do more good as a missionary at home. Like Paul, this man has "a desire to depart and be with Christ" but is called elsewhere for the time being (Philippians 1:23). Sometimes the place where God needs us for a time is not where we would prefer to be.

5:21–43

It is very unusual for a proper name to be mentioned in a healing miracle; this may have meant that Jairus and his family were converted to the gospel and thus were known in the early Church. Jesus follows him immediately, but the healing is delayed as another story is inserted into the middle of this one. This is another example of a sandwich in Mark that builds suspense and encourages the reader to compare the two stories. Reading them in conversation with each other can be a productive exercise.

The woman's "issue of blood" could indicate an irregular menstrual cycle, which would have affected her ritual and social standing in addition to her health. It has also left her in dire financial straits. The structure of the Greek in verses 25–27 strings together a series of participles and delays the main clause, "[She] touched his garment," until the very end, evoking the long, almost unendurable suffering of the woman. While her understanding of Jesus is incomplete, her faith in His ability to heal her is incredible.

The word translated as "virtue" in the King James Version (Greek *dynamis*) means "power" and is used frequently in the Gospels to describe a miracle. The disciples' response to Jesus's question is a bit humorous—Jesus is walking through a narrow, crowded street; *everyone* has touched Him. The woman's confession satisfies Jesus, who does not seem to be angry. Rather, He may have initiated this encounter as a moment for teaching; the woman came away from this brief interview understanding that Jesus was a person, not just some sort of magic object to be manipulated for one's own ends.

The immediate arrival of the messengers from Jairus's house indicates that this delay may have resulted in the death of the daughter. But Jesus does not even allow Jairus to react to this tragic news:

“Be not afraid, only believe.” As faith made the just-healed woman whole, so too can it save (a more literal translation of the verb translated as “made . . . whole;” Greek *sōizō*) his daughter. The professional mourners have preceded Jesus, indicating that the girl’s death has been expected for some time. Their response to Jesus’s observation that the girl is sleeping, not dead, is predictable—they do not see the double meaning in His words.

With the others expelled and only the parents, Peter, James, and John present, the atmosphere is quiet and reverent. The girl is returned to life with only the command to arise (given in Aramaic). This miracle will foreshadow Jesus’s own Resurrection. Another effect of the two miracles in these verses is to demonstrate that Jesus has the power to heal in many ways—in public and private, in response to appeals or unspoken prayers, to assist the sick or the dead. Although we may find ourselves in a variety of circumstances, we should never doubt the Lord nor His ability to provide aid in every moment of distress.

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