

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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The Gospel of Mark

**I. Mark 1:1 – 3:6
Popularity Breeds Contempt**

In the first two chapters of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is strikingly compassionate: he liberates a man from demon possession (1:23-27), heals many of the people's various diseases (1:29-34), cures a man with leprosy (1:40-45), absolves and heals a paralytic (2:1-12), and, in a culminating act of compassion, restores a man's withered hand (3:1-6). With what accolades do the local authorities shower Jesus for all his humanitarian activity? "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." (3:6) The first mystery of Mark's story is, "Why?" How does Jesus the people-helper draw such vehement opposition from the Jewish leaders in such a short time?

Mark's narrator provides the clues necessary to solve this mystery in a series of conflict episodes that pit Jesus against the Jewish leaders. Indeed, alongside the five acts of compassion listed above lie five direct confrontations. The scene is set when Jesus' first synagogue audience comments that the substitute (Jesus) is a much better teacher than their usual ones (the Scribes – 1:22). There follow heated debates about who has authority to forgive sins (2:1-12), what constitutes worthy dinner company (2:15-17), whether fasting is an important faith practice (2:18-20), and (twice) how the Sabbath commandment ought to be interpreted (2:23-27; 3:1-6).

Our attempts to explain the Pharisees' antipathy to Jesus must start with these conflicts. But on their own, such disagreements about the Torah (Moses' law) and Judaic truth do not explain violent reprisals. Rabbis always argue with one another about interpretations. It's what scholars do. These arguments do not usually lead to murderous plots. So what raises these Pharisees' temperature so quickly?

Because the answer to this question doesn't appear in any one passage, it can easily elude us. You and I customarily digest our Bible one paragraph at a time on a Sunday morning. But these clues are tiny and subtle, and they are sprinkled here and there along the way. We get them one every third week, so they don't string together. In fact, one of the profound luxuries of Bible study is to read continuously, and this author rewards such reading with insights.

Consider this: Jesus begins Mark's Gospel walking along the seashore and asking a few fishermen to join him (1:16-20). Two chapters later, he has become so famous and sought-after that he and his closest followers must take precautions to insure his safety among the adoring masses (3:7-8). Between these two scenes lie a string of casual allusions to Jesus' growing popularity (1:28, 33, 45; 2:2, 13). This astronomical growth in the size of Jesus' crowds seems an important clue. Rabbinic disagreement is one thing; massive emigration is another. When these Pharisees start losing market share, things get ugly.

Anyone who reads the Gospels much knows that all Jesus has to do to draw Pharisaic wrath is lift a finger on the Sabbath. In fact, he does it three times in this section (1:21-28; 2:23-28; 3:1-6); but the leaders only shout him down in two of those three scenes. The odd passage out is 1:21-28, where Jesus casts out a demon on the Sabbath and meets no opposition at all. It's the only scene in the four Gospels where Jesus does anything but teach on the Sabbath without opposition. Why?

Mark's narrator helps us answer our question by building 1:21-28 and 3:1-6 to be juxtaposed. First he puts the word "again" in 3:1 so we can't miss the call to comparison. Then, in each case a man presents himself to Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath and is healed. These similarities make one stark difference stand out: the audience response. In 1:21-28 "all were amazed," but in 3:1-6 "the Pharisees...conspired." This contrast needs explaining. Perhaps a Jesus flanked by four still-scaly fishermen seemed innocuous enough to the leaders (1:16-20); but one who attracted "great numbers from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon" had become a threat (3:7). Was the Pharisees' opposition to Jesus motivated by a pure concern for the Law of Moses or by professional rivalry? Near the end of this story, Pilate will detect that "it was out of jealousy that the Chief Priests had handed Jesus over [to be crucified]." (15:10) The Pharisees' early opposition to Jesus and their plot to destroy him seem similarly motivated.

On this side of the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Holocaust, Mark's character development can take on a very ominous tone. Centuries of Christians have fueled their anti-semitic fires with passages just like these. You and I know the very Jewish totality of this text (only a handful of Gentiles appear in all its sixteen chapters). We know that Jesus is a Jew, the disciples are all Jews, and the author is most likely a Jew. But through the ages, Christians have overlooked those simple truths and persecuted Jews because of Mark's (and the other Gospels') portrait of the Jewish leaders.

So what did Mark mean by giving the Pharisees such black hats? Recall that his book isn't primarily about Jewish leaders. In it, they are flat characters (like Democrats in a Republican's story) – foils, whose attacks give Jesus heroic opportunity. He capitalizes with winsome one-liners like “Sabbath is made for humanity, not humanity for Sabbath” and “render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.” By outing the Jewish leaders' rivalrous motives within his story world, Mark's narrator establishes for his audience the holy innocence of the One his book *is* primarily about.

And that is where this section ought to end: with Jesus. The Gospel's first verse tells us so: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” John shouts out about him in the wilderness, God tells him he loves him as he arises from baptismal waters, and then, in two chapters and a bit, he sets the world ablaze. By section's end he has reached the unreachable (demoniac), touched the untouchable (leper), healed the unhealable (paralytic), welcomed the unwelcomable (tax collectors and sinners). Because all of this has rattled the powers that be, he has also taken his very first steps toward a hill far away and an old rugged cross. Stay tuned!

General Questions:

1. Imagine that this is the only thing you have ever read or heard about Jesus. Then write three adjectives that best describe the Jesus you meet in Mark 1:1 – 3:6.

2. How do you imagine you would respond to Mark's Jesus? Would you be with the disciples? The crowds? The Jewish leaders? The unmentioned people who stayed at home? Why?

3. The story about Jesus healing a paralyzed man (2:1-11) brings together several themes that are important to Mark. One of them is Jesus' authority. When the scribes grumble, "Only God can forgive sins?" what are they (inadvertently) saying about Jesus?

Focus Text Questions:

1. Put yourself in the story of Mark 3:1-6. If you're the guy with the withered hand, what do you make of Jesus? What has he done for you? Is there more than one level to that good deed?

2. Next put yourself in the first audience of the story. How have the first two chapters prepared you to hear this paragraph in 3:1-6 more intelligently? What do you know that the man with the withered hand doesn't?

3. Now come back to the 21st century. Just before this scene, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath." Have you ever seen rigid enforcement of well-intended rules do anyone harm? Share an example. What kind of God does Jesus' saying portray?

For Further Study:

- Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Conflict Stories in Mark 2:1 – 3:6," JBL 92 (1973), 394-401.
- John Vannorsdall, "Mainline Churches", in William H. Willimon, Sermons in Duke Chapel: Voices from "A Great Towering Church" (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)