



The Gospel According to Mark

Lesson 3

Lesson 3 Commentary **Mark 2:1 – 5:43**
Lesson 4 Questions **Mark 6:1 – 8:30**

Introduction

In this session we will be covering four chapters, Mark 2 through 5. Before we dive in, we should cover some of the players that you will encounter for the first time (the scribes were mentioned once in Chapter 1). The “scribes” are mentioned 21 times in the book of Mark.

“The scribes by the New Testament period were experts in the **Law** (the Torah). In Jesus’s era, it seems that most of them were drawn from among the Pharisees [see below] and so were quite strict in their interpretation of the Law. They were one of the three components of the Sanhedrin (with the elders and chief priests; cf. Mark 14:43, 53; Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5) and gathered around them students whom they instructed in the Law. Their pupils called them by the respectful title of **rabbi** (Matt 23:2–7) and were expected to pass on their learning without deviation. Scribes lectured in the Temple (Luke 2:46).”¹

Except for one occasion, the scribes are depicted as enemies of Jesus.²

Another adversary of Jesus was the Pharisees. They are mentioned 12 times in the book of Mark and are never cast in a positive light. We always see them at odds with the ministry of Jesus.

“The Pharisees were a “religious sect or party within Judaism that flourished from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. In the early first century A.D., there were over six thousand Pharisees, according to Josephus (*Ant.* 17.42). The name is linked to the Hebrew term meaning “separated ones,” because they separated themselves from all forms of religious and ceremonial uncleanness.

¹ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 820.

² Mark 12:28-34.

They were known for their strict observance of ritual piety, purity, and tithing, and for their determination to prevent the Jewish faith from being contaminated by foreign religious practices, to which end they insisted on strict separation from the Gentiles.”³

You will see that the Pharisees collude with a group called the Herodians. They are only mentioned twice in Mark.

“The Herodians were a “faction or party whose exact identity has been the source of much discussion among scholars. They are mentioned twice in the New Testament, both times with the Pharisees (cf. Matt 22:16–22; Mark 3:6, 12:13–17). In Mark 3:6, the Herodians plot with the Pharisees to achieve the death of Jesus; in Matt 22:16–22 and Mark 12:13–17, they pose with the Pharisees the question to Jesus concerning tribute to Caesar. Scholars have suggested over the years that the Herodians were a religious faction, but today most believe that they were not connected to the religious establishment; they are more likely to have been supporters of the House of Herod. It is also possible that the term refers simply to members of the retinue or palace establishment of the Herods.”⁴

As opposed to the Pharisees the Herodians were sympathetic to Rome’s rule because Rome put Herod the Great and, eventually, his sons in power.

The last group mentioned (but not until Chapter 12) is the Sadducees. They are only mentioned once in Mark but are prominent in Matthew.

“The Sadducees were an elite or aristocratic element in Judaism. They were largely members of the priesthood and came from the most powerful of the priestly families. They were disliked for their haughty demeanor and judgmental attitudes. The teachings of the Sadducees differed from those of the Pharisees in a variety of ways. They denied the resurrection of the dead and the existence of angels and the soul (Acts 23:6–8); they rejected the oral tradition and regarded only the Torah, written law, as authoritative; they opposed predestination in favor of free choice, with prosperity or misery resting in the hands of the individual; and they tended to be more conservative in the interpretation of penal laws. In Acts 23:6–8, the Sadducees sat on the **Sanhedrin**, or Jewish high court, with the Pharisees, and Paul used their disagreements on the resurrection of the dead to provoke a near riot. Although the Pharisees and Sadducees were ancient enemies,

³ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 703.

⁴ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 358–359.

they united in their opposition to Jesus (cf. Matt 3:7; 16:1, 6, 11, 12; 22:23, 34; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 4:1; 15:17).”⁵

These, groups, along with the Disciples, the Romans and the Jewish people are the primary players for the remainder of the book of Mark.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2, in the NRSVCE, has four sections.

- Jesus heals the Paralytic
- Jesus calls Levi (aka Matthew)
- The Question about Fasting
- A Teaching about the Sabbath

A theme that connects the four events is “controversy.” All of these involve the questioning of actions taken by Jesus or his Apostles. These events and those following in the beginning of chapter 3 follow a similar pattern, using the first bullet as an example. The stories have “(1) an action by Jesus and/or his disciples (2:5); (2) an objection to this action (2:7); (3) a riposte by Jesus, often in the form of a counter-question (2:9); and (4) a saying that is the real point of the dialogue (2:10)”⁶

Turning to the healing of the paralytic, look closely at verse 5. Was it the faith of the paralytic that moves Jesus to forgive his sins? No, it is the faith of the four men that brought the paralytic! We see here the principle at work of the efficacy of the faith of others for salvation and healing. What sacrament in the Church today is administered based on the faith of those that brought the recipient of the sacrament? It is Baptism, when applied to an infant or child.

Continuing with the event, an extremely important term is used for the first time. After Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic (note, He did not cure the paralytic, only forgave his sins), the scribes start talking about blasphemy. That means that Jesus took on the role of God by forgiving sins. Without going into detail, this is a very serious issue in the time of Christ! Blasphemy means death under the Laws of Moses. But then he says something very puzzling. He calls Himself “the Son of man” and then cures the paralytic. What is He talking about? Turning to Dan 7:13-14 (RSVCE), Daniel has a dream about the “Son of Man” as follows:

⁵ Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, 802–803.

⁶ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 2, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 98.

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a *son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. *And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed* (Dan 7:13-14, emphasis added).”

While the Nation of Israel was monotheistic (that is, believed in one God), it was a complicated issue (e.g., there were various nuances of understanding what that meant). Clearly, the Son of Man in Dan 7:13-14 is human and shares in the glory of the “Ancient of Days,” the God of Israel. Daniel Boyarin, a contemporary Jewish theologian, states, “What this text [Daniel 7] projects is a second divine figure to whom will be given eternal dominion of the entire world, of a restored entire world in which this eternal king’s guidance and rule will be in accord, completely and finally, with the will of the Ancient of Days as well.”⁷ Daniel 7 is not the only passage that suggests that someone will sit on the throne with the God of Israel, but I will leave this subject for now. When we discuss Mark 14, I will have much more to say about this. For now, just remember that the term “Son of Man” was perceived as Messianic at the time of Christ.

Before turning to Chapter 3, turn to verses 2:23-28. Setting the scene, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a field plucking grains of wheat and eating them. When the Pharisees see it, they cry foul! Jesus and his disciples are violating the Sabbath by plucking the wheat. Remember, any form of work on the Sabbath was against the Law of Moses. Jesus is quick to cite a story about King David. If they were going to criticize Jesus and his disciples, they would also be criticizing their revered King David, which no upstanding Jew would do! He cites that the King David event occurred when *Abiathar* was high priest. Now go back to 1 Samuel 21:1. *Abiathar* was NOT high priest at the time of the event. His father, *Ahimelech*, was high priest. How could the Son of God make such a blatant error? This is one of the more controversial sections of Mark. It is a prime weapon used by sceptics who believe that the Bible is fraught with errors.

Or was it an error at all. You see, “*Abiathar* is infamous in OT history as the last high priest of his line, who was banished from Jerusalem and the priesthood for opposing Solomon, the son of David and the heir of his kingdom (1 Kings 2:26–27)”⁸ Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was sending a message to the Pharisees that they, too, may be the end of the line by opposing the true Son of David!

⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 32.

⁸ Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 70.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3, in the NRSVCE, has five sections.

- The Man with the Withered Hand
- The Multitude by the Sea
- Jesus appoints the Twelve
- Jesus and Beelzebul
- The True Kindred of Jesus

The first event in Chapter 3 is another controversy story like we saw in Chapter 2, following the same general steps as outlined above. The second event contains another “messianic secret” statement in verse 12.

Next, we come to the naming of the twelve apostles in Mark 3:16-19. There are similar verses in Matthew, Luke, and Acts. John does not have a corresponding section. If you read Matthew 10:2-4, Luke 6:14-16, and Acts 1:13, you will note certain differences. For instance, Matthew and Mark list an Apostle named Thaddaeus. Luke and Acts do not. Luke and Acts list Judas, the son of James. It is believed that Thaddaeus and Judas, the son of James, are the same person. It is speculated that Matthew and Mark did not want Judas, the son of James, to be confused with Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Matthew and Mark list Simon, the Cananaean, and Luke and Acts list Simon, the Zealot. Speculation is that the word Cananaean is an Aramaic term meaning Zealot. Most scholars believe that the number twelve is significant and represents the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel. The latter are the patriarchs of the old covenant, where the former are the patriarchs of the new covenant.⁹ One last point is the name that he gives James and John – “the sons of thunder.” Mark does not tell us why they are called this, but Luke does. Luke 9:51-56 reads:

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “*Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village” (emphasis added).

In the next event, we see that even his friends believe Jesus to be a bit excessive. However, their accusations pale in comparison to what the scribes have to say. Verse 22 reads, “And the scribes

⁹ Hahn and Mitch, *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament*, 71.

who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”” Jesus gives them a logic lesson and then accuses them of the only unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

“It is clear from 30 that ‘blasphemy against the Holy Ghost’ is the sin committed by those who attributed to the power of Satan the expulsion of demons by Christ. These miraculous works of mercy were so clearly due to the beneficent operation of divine power that to attribute them to Satan was a calumny of diabolical malice. Unlike other blasphemies or sins which might be partially excused by ignorance, passion or inadvertence, this was a sin of willful malice and blindness to the light. As long as such a mentality persists, pardon is impossible, not because of any limitation on the power or mercy of God, but because those who are guilty of this sin refuse to respond to the promptings of grace.”¹⁰

The point of the last event of Chapter 3 (True Kindred of Jesus) is not to deny that “his mother and brethren” are his family. The point is that following the will of God widens your family to include all that believe. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4, in the NRSVCE, has six sections.

- The Parable of the Sower
- Explanation of the Parable
- A Lamp is Not Hidden
- A Parable about Seeds
- The Use of Parables
- Jesus Calms a Storm on the Sea

Jesus explains the first Parable and the third, fourth and fifth are reasonably straightforward. Verses 33 and 34 says all that needs to be said related to Jesus’ use of Parables, at least related to Chapter 4: “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

The last section, “Jesus Calms a Storm on the Sea,” like the use of the Son of Man in Chapter 2, is pivotal to Jesus’ Messianic identity. To set the scene, Jesus has just finished telling several

¹⁰ J. A. O’Flynn, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St Mark,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard and Edmund F. Sutcliffe (Toronto; New York; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 912.

parables to a large crowd beside the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and the Apostles board a boat to go to the other side when a storm arises.

“A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him (Mark 4:37-41)?””

Control of the wind and sea in the Old Testament is only attributable to God. One such example that closely matches the wording in Mark is Psalm 107:23-30:

“Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the LORD,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and *raised the stormy wind*,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and *were at their wits’ end*.
Then *they cried to the LORD* in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven” (emphasis added).

In the italicized portions, note the similarities to the words of Mark. However, in this Psalm the writer is speaking about YHWH, the God of Israel.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5, in the NRSVCE, only has two sections.

- Jesus Heals the Gerasene Demoniac
- A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

The first one involves Jesus casting out a legion of demons. Matthew actually says there were two demoniacs. The Gerasenes lived on the east side of the Jordan river and were Gentiles who raised pigs. Jesus casts the demons into the pigs, who ran down a hill into the sea and were drowned. Did you notice that Jesus seems to be over the Messianic secret in verse 19.

The last event illustrates what has been called the “Markan Sandwich.” Mark starts to relate a story, then interrupts the story with another story, then returns to the original story. Here, He starts by telling the story of Jairus’s daughter, who is on the verge of death. On his way, a woman with a hemorrhage touches Christ’s robe and is healed. Then, he proceeds to Jairus’s house where his daughter has died. Jesus raises her from the dead. Did you notice the similarities between the stories?

- Both are females.
- The woman has been hemorrhaging for twelve years and the daughter is twelve years old.
- Both are “suffering” from uncleanness (female hemorrhaging and dead body).
- Both of their uncleanness was overcome by the holiness of Christ, just like the leper in Chapter 1.

However, the Messianic secret is reintroduced in verse 43!

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 4

Mark 6:1 – 8:30

Day 1 - Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read Mark 6:1 – 29

Why do you think that the people that grew up with Jesus rejected him? Can you think of an example of this in your life?

If Mary was always a virgin, how would you explain the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus? (Hint: CCC 500)

Can you think of any other explanations that could work and Mary always be a virgin?

Day 3 – Read Mark 6:30 – 52

Prior to the feeding of the five thousand, you have the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth and the execution of John the Baptist. What could this order of events be showing us?

Compare Mark 6:41 with Mark 14:22. What are the similarities? What does this indicate (Hint: CCC 1335)?

Read John 6:1 – 13 and compare to Mark 6:30 – 44. What are the striking differences and what might they indicate?

Day 4 – Read Mark 6:53 – 7:23

Read Numbers 15:37 – 41 and compare to Mark 6:53 – 56. What does this indicate about Jesus?

Mark 7:1-13 deals with “traditions” and Jesus appears to reject them. Read 1 Corinthians 11:2. Read 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Think about Catholic tradition and Catholic Tradition. How do you reconcile these concepts?

Day 5 – Read Mark 7:24 – 8:21

What are your impressions of the interaction between Jesus and the Syrophenician (Canaanite) woman?

Jesus uses his spit to perform a miracle. What seems to be Jesus's attitude toward to the material world?

Read Isaiah 35:4 – 6 and compare to Mark 7:37. What does this mean about Jesus?

Compare the Mark 8:1 – 9 to Mark 6:30 – 43. Note the similarities and differences.

Read Deuteronomy 7:1. Based on this reading and your knowledge of Israel, what do the numbers 12 and 7 indicate in verses Mark 8:19 – 21?

Day 6 – Read Mark 8:21 – 8:30.

It took Jesus twice to cure the blind man. Why is that?

With Peter's declaration following Mark 8:19 – 21, what does that indicate?