

Gospel of Mark: The Beginning of Victory

“These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.” – 1 Corinthians 10:11

Welcome to our third study in the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 3 we see Jesus both facing intense pressure and using great power. All of us face opposition and conflict in our lives. This chapter helps us understand the nature of that opposition and the enormous power which Christ gives to his disciples.

I. Continuing Conflict on the Sabbath – Mark 3:1-6

- a. Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath. Is this the same Sabbath as the previous scene of picking grain? We don't know but Mark presents it as a continuing theme.
- b. There is a man in the synagogue with a withered hand. Some commentators believe he may have been planted there by the Pharisees to set a trap for Jesus.
- c. The Pharisees' desire is to “accuse him” (Mark 3:2). Their issue would be that this healing does not have to be done on the Sabbath because the man with the withered hand is not in mortal danger. The healing could easily wait until the next day.
- d. Jesus again confronts them with their total misunderstanding. Not only is he the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27) but his rhetorical question of doing good or harm on the Sabbath makes it plain that it should be obvious that we should do good on the Sabbath (or any other day). The Sabbath is designed to remind us of God's goodness and deliverance (Deuteronomy 5:15).
- e. Jesus is angry and grieved at “their hardness of heart.” – Mark 3:5
- f. Jesus of course heals the man – Mark 3:5
- g. The Pharisees now conspire with the “Herodians,” probably a political group, “how to destroy him” – Mark 3:6

II. Jesus appoints the Twelve – Mark 3:7-19

- a. Jesus continues to heal and many come to him. – Mark 3:7-10
- b. Only the demons know who he is (they call him “Son of God”) but he forbids them to tell (the Messianic Secret again)
- c. Jesus goes up the mountain to call the disciples. This suggests a parallel with Moses who went up Mount Sinai to be appointed by God. However it's not clear that a Roman audience would catch this allusion although from Paul's epistle it seems there were both Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome (although note a point from the first lesson that Mark seems to have to explain Jewish customs).
- d. Jesus gives the twelve three tasks
 - i. To be with him
 - ii. To sent out to proclaim the message
 - iii. To have authority to cast out demons
- e. The reference to Judas is interesting (Mark 3:19). Is this foreshadowing or did Mark presume that his audience already knew the basic story of Jesus' death and resurrection?

III. Who are Jesus' mother and brothers? - Mark 3:20-35

- a. Crowds still come to Jesus – Mark 3:20
- b. His family comes to restrain him because people say he is out of his mind (!) – Mark 3:21
- c. More seriously the Pharisees say that he is in league with the Devil. This is probably the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that is unpardonable (Mark 3:29).
- d. Since Jesus is casting out those in league with Satan how can he be under Satan's power since a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. This also fits in with his later statement that "those who are not against us are for us" (Mark 9:40).
- e. On the contrary a strong man (or kingdom) is not overcome by his allies but by an opponent who is stronger than he and able to tie him up and plunder his house (Mark 3:27). Many regard this as a parable of Jesus' work of defeating Satan (the "strong man"). Up to this point Jesus has cast out the demons who follow Satan (Mark 1:25-26, 34, 39, Mark 3:11). Now he is speaking of defeating Satan himself.

The Romans lived in a culture which celebrated heroes, "strong men," both mythical and historical. This would include Hercules, Achilles and Aeneas as well as Julius Caesar and his son, Caesar Augustus. The Romans could also hear in the reference to the strong man's kingdom an echo of Hades, the mythical god of the underworld. Heroes might on rare occasion visit the underworld and, even rarer, might rescue someone from there. However not even Zeus would claim to be able to "plunder" Hades' domain. In fact Zeus' intention to rescue people from death is strongly opposed by the other gods. Such an action suggests an overturning of the basic order of the cosmos. It is important to understand this context to appreciate why people, and apparently even Jesus' own family, thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Who could give authority to cast out demons? Who could possibly overpower Satan and plunder his house?

- f. "your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside" Those who belong to Jesus are never outside of him but with him. "Whoever does the will of God" Mark 3:34-35

IV. Questions for us

1. How does Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath relate to the practical living out of our faith in him? In what ways do we fall into the trap of setting rules without asking the larger question of how are we doing good or causing harm? For Jesus religion can be harmful. How do we keep that from happening?
2. Jesus is a very controversial figure in this passage. The Pharisees see him as a threat. His own family comes to restrain him because people think he's crazy. Jesus looks at his critics with anger. How does this passage affect our view of Jesus?. Do these descriptions fit in with our picture of Jesus? Does our view of Jesus need to change? How?
3. Jesus in Mark's Gospel repeatedly reveals his power by overcoming the demonic. He will bind the "strong man," himself, Satan. Jesus calls the disciples to be with him, to proclaim his message and to have authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15). Is this how we see ourselves? How are we being with Jesus today, proclaiming his message and casting out demons?
4. How do we see ourselves as part of Jesus' family? At times Jesus in Mark's Gospel speaks in very broad terms. His family are those who do the will of God? In this particular passage Jesus doesn't speak of faith, repentance or salvation. Why do you think that's so? Do you think we sometimes limit the definition of what it is to be a Christian? If so, what are some of the ways that we do that?
5. What are some of your thoughts and questions?