

Week 3:

Mark 3-4

Open with prayer.

(repeated here from last week in the event having it here is helpful)

- However your group may start your gathering, whether it be with a meal, or informal fellowship time, or weekly checkins of general life-event check-ins, using prayer as an element to transition into the discussion of the text can be helpful.
- Asking others to open in prayer can add to the diversity of voices involved, and might be a way others present can grow as well.

Check in:

(repeated here from last week in the event having it here is helpful)

- Were people able to meditate and pray over the passage? Is the general prompt of setting aside one moment of devotion/quiet time to pray and meditate over a part of the assigned reading accessible enough? *(Take note if additional meditation guides for the devotional/quiet times would be helpful. Also a reminder that sometimes we may be lead to pray and meditate over a smaller portion of the assigned passage, and that's ok. Of course, having at least read the entirety of the assigned passage is ideal and recommended.)*
- What did engaging the text look like for you this week? (This can be a great way to take in relational/pastoral knowledge of how people walk with God. Unique features, strengths or challenges may be identified through questions like this).
- Was the resource guide helpful? What could be improved? Feedback will help refinement.
- Did anyone add or do they plan on adding an additional resource to their time through Mark?

Examples of Asking the Basic Questions

This week we want to give some examples of what "Asking the Basic Questions" for Bible study might look like as applied to different sections of this week's readings. For a break down of those questions, refer to Week 2's Facilitator Guide in the section by the same title.

Passage: Mark 3:1-6, Jesus Heals on the Sabbath

Observation: Jesus healed on the Sabbath which was against the law

Interpretation: There is a sense of "law" that needed to be broken in order for Jesus to make his statement about the Kingdom, and uphold the essence of the Sabbath.

Sabbath rests on deeper truths. Truths are organized in hierarchy of lesser or greater, and such hierarchy calls for prioritization that can guide faithful observance. *(More threads of interpretation could be: the concept of "work" is subject to interpretation, interpretation that subjects itself to the proper hierarchy of truth etc... There may be more than one way to identify, word, or tease out the interpretations in play.)*

Application: What things in our day have been given the status of "lawful/unlawful" that may need to be broken? What would it take to know what laws need to be broken or up kept? How do our lives convey a healthy knowledge of hierarchy of truths, and prioritization that is faithful to the deeper truths?

Furthermore, there is a way in which these questions can even play out as actions happening within the characters of the story. Learning to see this angle may produce new perspectives. See below:

Regrading Observation: both Jesus and the synagogue leaders/Pharisees held the same observation from the law regarding the sabbath, that being, no work was to be done on the Sabbath.

Regarding Interpretation: Jesus and the synagogue leaders/Pharisees hold different interpretations. A great question for discussion could be asked, "what were the different interpretations held by Jesus and the Pharisees?" Some insight is provided below:

- Pharisee's interpretation: no work was to be done on the Sabbath. Acts of healing involved work, therefore, healing was forbidden.
- Jesus' interpretation: There was a deeper truth upon which the Sabbath is established, namely, doing good, and preserving life. Healing the man with the withered hand honored the deeper truth upon which the Sabbath rested and hence, any work entailed in such an activity was not only permissible but dutiful.
- *(it is valuable to note, that there is an area in which Jesus and the Pharisees may overlap with similar areas of interpretation. Asking the question of where this might happen is a good one.)*

Regarding application: Pharisees do not heal on the Sabbath, Jesus does.

For a look at how observation lends itself to seeing the structure of content in passages, see *Resource Insight* that focuses on Mark 3:20-22, regarding story "sandwiches." A more detailed emphasis on Mark's narrative "sandwiches" will be provided later as well.

Closing with Praise and Prayer

(repeated here from last week in the event having it here is helpful)

- Closing your time by praising God for the discussion as a whole, or for particular insights that were edifying can be a great way to end. By praise we don't mean music, just spoken declarations out loud and directed at God. ("God, we praise You for _____")
- Also, praying that God would help us to apply and live out any of what the Spirit has revealed in the discussion.

What follows are selected observations, potential interpretations, and application prompts or questions based on specific passages corresponding to the assigned readings for the week. More of these can be found in the actual recommended resources which are listed at the end of Week 1's Facilitator Guide. These are a few selected segments in the event they are helpful.

Resource Insight: **From Mark: Double Day Commentary**

More Trouble on the Sabbath **Mark 3:1-6**

THE ENCOUNTER IN the cornfields may have been just a chance meeting that gave rise to an argument. But this time there is certainly nothing accidental about the confrontation in the synagogue. It almost looks as though the man has been "planted" to provide a test case. At any rate, the Pharisees are watching Jesus, with a view to finding evidence against him.

Healing on the Sabbath

HEALING WOULD NORMALLY involve some sort of work (preparing medicine, binding wounds, etc.), and so fell outside the scribes' definition of what could be permitted on the sabbath. The only concession allowed was if there was imminent danger to life, but clearly a "withered hand" (probably some form of paralysis) could wait until the next day. It might be suggested that the scribal rules would not apply to the sort of healing Jesus normally practiced, by a mere word of command, since no "work" was involved. But a healing was a healing, and the scribal law forbade it. So "they watched him."

It looks as though Jesus takes the initiative, since Mark makes no mention of an appeal for help from the man himself. He is aware of what the Pharisees have planned, but he is as eager as they are to get the issue into the open, and decides to take the fight to them. The healing will follow in due course, as authoritatively and immediately as usual, but first the principle of sabbath healing needs to be sorted out.

A Question of Priorities

JESUS ' QUESTION, LIKE his comments in the cornfield, goes to the heart of what the sabbath is all about. These are not the terms in which the scribes were accustomed to debating sabbath issues. They could discuss with great skill what did and did not constitute work, and how in practice life could be allowed to carry on while still keeping the sabbath " holy. " But to put the issue in terms as broad and as illegal as simply " to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill " was to shift the debate onto uncomfortably far -reaching grounds for which their detailed debates had not prepared them. So "they were silent."

But Jesus has not merely succeeded in silencing his opponents. He has also again given an important clue to how religious rules such as the sabbath law need to be interpreted. Taken together with his pronouncement in 2:27 that the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath, this principle of aiming to "do good" on the sabbath leaves detailed casuistry (trying not to break the rules) behind, and takes us onto the far more demanding ground of positively looking for the way of keeping the sabbath holy that will most benefit one's fellow human beings. If to " do good " involves setting aside a scribal ruling, then it is the ruling that must go. So Jesus heals the man's hand.

Mutual Rejection

IN VERSE 5, as probably in 1:41, Mark tells us that Jesus was " angry. " What annoys him this time is clear, the willingness to put the keeping of man-made rules before the well-being of other people. Perhaps also it is the Pharisees ' deliberate attempt to incriminate him that annoys him. But they are no less annoyed, partly by his (as they see it) flagrant flouting of the law, and partly by the cavalier way in which he has asserted his general principle of " goodness " over against their concept of holiness, leaving them silenced and humiliated. The healing in itself may not seem like a capital offense, but the last two encounters have revealed an increasingly unbridgeable gulf between Jesus ' understanding of religion and theirs. The man is dangerous, and must be eliminated. It will still take some time, but the wheels are in motion that will ultimately take Jesus to the cross.

- R.T. France, Mark: Doubleday Commentary

[Discussion Questions]

- was there ever a time you were lead to "break the rules"? Tell the story. How did you discern that breaking said rule was the ideal thing to do? In retrospect would you do it again? Was it the best thing to do?
- What other things in our world today function as a type of sabbath that Jesus might break in a similar manner?
- what are priorities in your life past or present that have been or are being confronted in a similar manner?

Resource Insight:
From Mark: Double Day Commentary

Mark 3:20-22

How Do You Explain Jesus

MARK SOMETIMES LIKES to enfold one story within another (or to " sandwich " it) so as to help his readers to listen to the one in the light of the other. He has done that in the latter part of chapter 3. Within the story of how Jesus ' own family responded to his extraordinary behavior (3: 20-21, 31-35) he has enclosed an altogether more hostile and threatening encounter with some scribes from Jerusalem. What the two stories have in common is that each group is struggling to find ways of making sense of Jesus. They have heard about his remarkable activity, especially about his exorcisms, and, since they cannot simply dismiss the stories as untrue, they need an explanation. Yet neither group yet believes his claim to be working by the power of God. The alternative explanations they come up with are not very flattering: His family think he is mad, and the scribes accuse him of being in league with the devil!

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

MOST OF US must have some sympathy with Jesus ' mother and brothers and sisters. To have a member of the family behave in such an unconventional way, and become a public spectacle, is deeply embarrassing. Unlike the thronging crowds, they cannot believe that someone they have known all his life can be that special. He is making a fool of himself, and, for his own good, he must be stopped. (Incidentally, where NRSV has " people were saying, " the Greek is simply " they were saying, " and the "they" reads most naturally as the family themselves.)

In verse 21 they set out on this mission, and in verse 31 they will arrive. We shall see, then, how Jesus responds to their well-meaning skepticism.

In League with Beelzebul

MARK MAKES A point of the fact that the scribes are not locals (like those of 2:6, 16,24; 3:6). Now there is an even more threatening note: Scribes have come into Galilee from the capital, Jerusalem, to question his activity. We shall meet more scribes from Jerusalem in 7:1, again coming up to Galilee and making trouble for Jesus. These are strong hints of the confrontation that is to come when Jesus eventually leaves Galilee for Jerusalem.

Their accusation is altogether more damaging than the skepticism of Jesus' family, and will sting Jesus into a much more scathing reply. Beelzebul was a popular name for Satan, the chief of the demons. To accuse Jesus of complicity with Beelzebul was to imply that he practiced black magic, or worse. Even more than that, the phrase " He has Beelzebul " probably means also that he is himself possessed by an evil spirit, indeed by the most evil of all. That is how Mark will interpret their accusation in verse 30. So, far from being the deliverer of those in the grip of spiritual evil, he is himself under its control, and his supposed exorcisms are in fact forwarding the purposes of Satan, not defeating them.

In verses 23-30 we will hear Jesus' response to this scandalous accusation. Then in verses 31-35 we will return to the family. The two groups, in contrast with the eager crowds and the committed disciples, represent the failure of some to grasp the significance of what was happening in the ministry of Jesus, and their defensive reaction is that of people who are out of their depth. People can still today be polarized by their responses to Jesus. It is hard to be indifferent about him.

- R.T. France, Mark: Doubleday Commentary

[Discussion Questions]

- was there ever a time you were somehow "disowned" or misunderstood by family for the sake of the Gospel?

Resource Insight:
From Mark: Double Day Commentary

Mark 3:23-30

" BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT "

For Satan or Against Him?

IN VERSES 23-27 Jesus offers what might be called a "common sense" reply. The scribes' accusation does not make sense. Why should Satan want Jesus to drive out his own demonic forces? That would be to divide and weaken his own power. The sensible interpretation of the exorcisms (whose reality the scribes clearly cannot deny) is that it is a successful assault on Satan (the "strong man"), not an act of homage to him!

Jesus is the plunderer of the "strong man's" house, and the fact that he can do so shows that Satan is powerless ("tied up") before him. The conflict that was foreshadowed in 1: 12-13 has now been well and truly joined, and Jesus is proving himself the stronger. The kingdom of Satan is giving way before the kingdom of God.

The Unforgivable Sin

BUT JESUS DOES not leave his response at that level of "sensible" argument. This is more than a polite academic debate. He confronts these scornful scribes with one of the most severe warnings in the Bible. They are in danger of committing, indeed may already have committed, the unforgivable sin.

There is an amazing breadth to verse 28-any sin or blasphemy be forgiven. But to appeal to it as a sort of carte blanche is to take it out of context, for its function here is to place in stark contrast the one sin that is declared to be beyond the scope of forgiveness, that of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

This saying has caused untold agony to many who have tortured themselves with the fear that they, too, may have committed the unforgivable sin. In most cases that fear is quite groundless. It derives from the failure to read the text in its context. And Mark has gone out of his way to help us to interpret it correctly, since he adds his own explanatory comment, "for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" He could hardly be more explicit. This is not a vague, general threat to anyone who may have had unholy thoughts. It is directed against the specific charge of the scribes that Jesus was working by the power of Beelzebul. In so accusing him, they were attributing the glorious and manifest work of God to the power of evil, and such a radical perversion of the truth reveals a deliberate hostility against God himself. It is such settled opposition to the work of the divine spirit that Jesus pronounces unforgivable. from the impure thoughts and

This is a far cry words with the memory of which some sensitive souls have tortured themselves. Such people would be better advised to focus their attention on verse 28 rather than on verse 29!

- R.T. France, Mark: Doubleday Commentary

[Discussion Questions]

- Is the "unforgivable sin" literally unforgivable?
- Had anyone in the story actually committed the unforgivable sin? If so, was there truly no way out for them?

Resource Insight:
From Mark For Everyone

Mark 3:20-30

Jesus and Beelzebul

From the safety of my armchair, I watched the mass demonstration on the TV news. It started peacefully, at least on the surface. Banners and placards gave out a strong message, but the crowd seemed relaxed enough. The police were standing well back, watching for trouble but quite cheerful. Some of them joked with the marchers as they went by.

Nobody knew how it happened, but suddenly everything changed. There was a scuffle and a scrap, and a whole section of the crowd stopped marching and started shouting at the police. Some threw bottles. The police charged the demonstrators, swinging batons at random. The battle quickly spread up and down the street. Shops were smashed, hundreds were arrested.

The close-up TV shots, and the recordings of what people were saying at the time, made it clear what had happened. The police had decided that the demonstrators were 'scum'. The demonstrators had decided that the police were 'pigs'. Once they had labelled them like that they could do what they liked. They were no longer dealing with humans, but with animals, and dirty ones at that. Raise the stakes, stick a label on people, and then it doesn't matter what you do and who you hurt.

That's what seems to be going on as word about Jesus spreads to Jerusalem. After all, if Jesus' own family begin to think he's mad, what is the wider public to make of him—particularly that part of the wider public that concerns itself with the ancestral traditions of Israel? This passage is in fact a powerful witness to the remarkable things Jesus was doing. The early church certainly didn't make up the story about people saying he was mad, or in league with the devil. Equally, people only say that kind of thing when the stakes are raised, when something is happening for which there is no other explanation—in this case, when a power is at work to heal people who themselves seem to be in the grip of demonic forces.

Mark, of course, wants us to understand precisely what is going on. John the Baptist said that Jesus was 'someone stronger than me' (1:7). When Jesus now speaks about tying up the strong man and plundering his house, we are meant to understand that Jesus is now acting as the Stronger One, who has won an initial victory over the enemy (the temptation after the baptism) and is now able to make inroads into his territory.

The scribes, of course, don't like what he's doing because it doesn't fit into their categories. Jesus isn't accredited. He must therefore be sidelined. He must be labelled in such a way that people will no longer take him seriously. He must, they say, be in league with the arch-demon, Beelzebul. Maybe he's even possessed by Beelzebul. That would explain it; and it would also justify them doing anything they wanted to control him, to contain him, perhaps to silence him for ever. Again, Mark allows the dark shadow of the cross to fall on the page even at this early stage in the story.

Jesus doesn't respond in kind. He doesn't lash back with an instant label for the scribes. He merely points out the flaw in their thinking. If the accuser (the word in Hebrew is 'the satan', which was becoming a proper name by this time, but without losing its original meaning) were to cast out the satan, he (or it) is fighting against himself. If civil war breaks out in a kingdom, it's the end of the kingdom; if members of a household start fighting among themselves, it's the end of the family unit. So if the devil is fighting the devil, the devil's kingdom is obviously coming to an end. Thus, even if the scribes' analysis of the situation is correct, the kingdom of the satan is toppling. In other words, Jesus' basic claim, that in his work God's kingdom is arriving, is true, even if their 'labelling' of him is accurate.

But of course the label is wrong. Jesus offers a different account of what's going on. The Stronger One has arrived, and the Strong One finds his house being burgled. Jesus' healings, and particularly his exorcisms, are signs that God's kingdom is indeed arriving, the kingdom in which people who have been held captive will at last be set free.

Jesus does, though, add a warning, which has often been misunderstood. What is this 'unforgivable sin' in verse 29?

His critics had painted themselves into a corner. Once you label what is in fact the work of the Holy Spirit as the work of the devil, there's no way back. It's like holding a conspiracy theory: all the evidence you see will simply confirm your belief. You will be blind to the truth. It isn't that God gets specially angry with one sin in particular. It's rather that if you decide firmly that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a sadistic murderer, you will never give your consent to the operation.

There is no middle way, for the world today as for Israel then. Jesus isn't just a 'mildly interesting historical figure', as some in today's world would like him to be (another label, please note, designed to neutralize Jesus and keep him out of harm's way). He is either the one who brought God's kingdom, or a dangerous madman. Those who preach and live by Jesus' message must be on the alert for opposition of all sorts, sometimes subtle, sometimes threatening. And they must learn, too, how to respond.

- N.T. Wright, Mark for Everyone

