

Ministry and Controversy in Galilee
THE STORY, 272-276

Mark 1:21-3:6 – pages 272 – 74

Pages 272-274 include texts and summaries from Mark 1:21-3:6. These stories fall into two sections that illustrate aspects of Jesus's unusual authority. The story of the demoniac in the Capernaum synagogue through the story of the cleansing of the leper demonstrate Jesus's authority over evil and sickness.

The congregation at Capernaum are amazed because Jesus teaches as one who has his own authority. This is different from the other teachers of Torah because they cite authorities of the past for their Scripture interpretations. Notice that the exorcism is also called "a new teaching – with authority!" The Gospel writer is signaling that everything that Jesus says and does constitutes his teaching. Jesus's words about the Kingdom match his deeds that manifest the Kingdom. The demon's identification of Jesus as "the Holy One of God" is accurate, but incomplete, so Jesus silences him.

Simon (Peter) and Andrew, James and John are all residents of Capernaum, so it is natural that Jesus would go to Simon's home. When he heals Simon's mother-in-law, her response to the gift of healing is to serve.

Everywhere Jesus goes from now on he will attract a crowd. In order to be with God in peace he has to go away by himself. Simon and the others don't want him praying; they want him continuing to heal. They like being the companions of the latest celebrity. But Jesus's schedule is not determined by anyone but God, so he heads for other villages.

The cleansing of the leper is an interesting story because of the way the leper words his request: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." He knows (probably from the reports from Capernaum) that Jesus is **able** to cure him; the only question is whether Jesus is **willing** to do so. Jesus answers his question and "he was cleansed."

The English word "leprosy" translates words in Hebrew and Greek that cover a wide variety of skin problems, not just Hansen's disease. Lepers were excluded from contact with others, not because people were afraid of contracting their disease (after all, germ theory is several centuries in the future). They were isolated because contact with them made a person ritually unclean, as were the lepers themselves. Anthropologists are not sure why leprosy and not other diseases conveyed ritual impurity. The logic of the clean/unclean legislation in Torah defies complete categorization. One does not become ritually impure by

doing something morally wrong, for example. God instructed humankind to “be fruitful and increase in numbers” (*THE STORY*, page 2) and the only way to do this is through sexual intercourse, which, nevertheless, renders a couple ritually impure. Nevertheless, once one became ritually impure, she/he could transmit that impurity to others by touch and to become ritually pure again a person had to follow the prescribed ritual, sometimes just immersion in water, sometimes a sacrifice. What we have to remember is that all this clean/unclean legislation was not made up by obsessive-compulsive Pharisees who liked rules. It was given by God through Moses (read Leviticus). All the Pharisees were doing was trying to live by it.

Jesus tells the leper, “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” This is an odd statement. Presumably the priest who does the ritual will realize that the man has been healed. However, Mark, Matthew and Luke are full of instances in which Jesus tells people he has healed not to tell anyone. There are a lot of theories about why the Gospel writers emphasize this, so my opinion is just one of many. My guess is that what is being communicated is that Jesus’s full identity will not be clear until his story is complete. He is a healer, but not only that. He is an exorcist, but not only that. He is a teacher, but not only that. He will die “for our sins,” but that is not the only reason for his coming. Jesus receives his self-definition from God and will not be defined by other human beings, let alone by demons!

The next panel of stories runs from Mark 2:1-3:6. It begins with the healing of the paralyzed man and concludes with the healing of the man with a shriveled hand. This group of stories demonstrates Jesus’s authority over Scripture interpretation and over sin.

Interestingly, it is the faith of the four men who bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus that Jesus connects with his healing. This guy came to get healed, not to get his sins forgiven, but he gets both. We are not told what the homeowner thought about having a hole dug in his roof. When the first audience of this story heard that Jesus’s critics were thinking, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” they would have winked at each other: “Who indeed!” One of the most powerful aspects of Gospel narratives is the fact that the evangelists enable the audience to enjoy knowing more than the characters in the story know. Jesus’s question, “Which is easier . . .” makes the point that if he can do the hard thing (heal the paralyzed man) then he has the authority to do what “only God can do,” that is, forgive his sins.

The calling of Levi is one of the first surprises in the narrative. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman governors. Their own livelihood depended on how much more they could squeeze out of the people than they had to pay to the Romans. This particular tax collector is especially heinous because he was named for the ancestor of priests and temple singers---a heritage he is besmirching by his job. In the next scene Jesus is found to be sharing table fellowship with many tax collectors and sinners. To eat a meal in someone's house created a bond of hospitality that was powerful in the ancient world. If you took God's word seriously, you didn't share table fellowship with people who didn't. Jesus, however, ate not only with tax collectors and sinners but also with scribes and Pharisees. Go figure.

When criticized, Jesus responds with sarcasm that is not easily recognized in the written text. His reply, "I came, not to call the [self-identified] '*righteous*' people, but sinners," means something like, "If you know you're sick, come to the doctor, but if you don't even recognize that you're sick, I can't help you."

His statement leaves his disciples, then and now, with a choice: Do I want to be identified with the self-righteous people who are not called, or do I want to be among the called, and therefore be identified as a sinner? Those seem to be the only two options.

The final story, the healing of the man's hand on the Sabbath, establishes Jesus's authority to interpret the meaning of the day of rest made holy by God's own rest after creation. God does not provide excuses for God's people to ignore the needs of others. The "Herodians" are mentioned only here; they must be partisans of Herod Antipas. On pages 286-87 we find out what happens to people who cross Herod.

The excerpts from Mark close with the naming of "The Twelve"---a motley crew indeed. Notice that Levi is not mentioned. There is no reason in the text to identify him with Matthew. The purpose of this group is (1) "to be with him" and (2) "that he might send them out" (a) "to preach" and (b) "to have authority to drive out demons." If they are going to do (a) and (b) they will first have to spend time with Jesus.

Women who followed Jesus – Luke 8:1-3, page 275, third paragraph.

For these women, at least one of whom has a husband, to be wandering around with Jesus is extraordinary for that time. Luke makes it clear that there are more than just the three who are mentioned. The women provide the financial support for Jesus and the other men, since they can no longer fish, collect taxes, or foment revolution (Simon the Zealot). Mary Magdalene, like the man in the

Capernaum synagogue, is a person who has been delivered from demons. This, however, does not make her a prostitute. There is no indication in any of the Gospels that there was anything unusually wrong with Mary Magdalene's morals. The "sinful woman" who anoints Jesus's feet in Luke 7 is not named. Both Mark and Matthew have a story about an anonymous woman who anoints Jesus's head. In John 12 the anointing woman is identified as Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus, not Mary Magdalene. And yet, authors, painters, and poets through the centuries have assumed that she must be the nameless woman in Luke 7 and not only a "sinner," but specifically a prostitute. The moral of this story is, don't assume that what you read in Christian literature is correct. Check it against the Bible.

John the baptizer's question – Matthew 11:2-14. Pages 275-76.

John is wondering why, if Jesus is really the Messiah, things aren't getting better any sooner. Jesus does not make direct claims but points John's messengers to what God is doing through him. He praises John, calling him "Elijah who was to come" (Malachi 4:5). Malachi had not specifically said that Elijah would make ready for the Messiah, but he had said that Elijah would prepare the way for "the Day of the Lord," that would usher in the Kingdom of God. By Jesus's time, people had come to believe that the coming of the Messiah would be announced by a re-appearance of Elijah. Thus, Jesus indirectly identifies himself as the Messiah. The expectation of the appearance of Elijah before the Messiah is why the Passover seder still includes a place set for Elijah and a door left open for his arrival.

Reflections on Christian maturity

There are still people today who try to define Jesus in terms of only one aspect of his total identity. Some may appeal to him for a miracle, but have no intention of associating with the kind of people with whom Jesus associated. Some are quick to identify the "demons" at work in the world but not willing to see themselves as sick sinners who need healing from Dr. Jesus.

We also are under pressure to conform to identities that come from other people and represent only part of who God says we are. People like to pigeonhole us as "handicapped," "rich," "addicted," "powerful," "smart," "unemployed," without bothering to look deeper. But the One who made us is the only One who has the right to define us. Like Jesus, we have to find the time to spend in God's presence in order to know and to be who we really are.