

# A WINTER BIBLE STUDY ON THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Tuesday March 9, 2021: Session 3 - Readings  
Galilee: "Healing & Teaching" – Mark 2:1-3:6 (NRSV)

## Jesus Heals a Paralytic

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

## Jesus Calls Levi

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there

### **Background:** *The religious leaders opposing Jesus.*

These "scribes" have been mentioned once previously (1:22). They were religious scholars and experts when it came to interpreting rabbinic law. In Mark 2:16 we are introduced to the Pharisees, who were a group of separatists distinguished by their stringent adherence to rabbinic law. They "separated" themselves by refusing to keep company with "sinners," like those mentioned in the rest of Mark 2. And while some scribes were Pharisees, few Pharisees were in fact scribes. Regardless, both groups knew the Scriptures backward and forward. They devoted their lives to the very words of God yet failed to recognize God-in-the-flesh. Even worse, they also accused him of blasphemy (2:7) and plotted his death (3:6). Clearly being an expert in the things of God doesn't mean we actually know him.

Today we have more access than ever to information. With the Internet and smartphones, the Bible is at our fingertips at all times. And yet we so quickly forget that, fundamentally, we're sinners in need of a healer.

**In what ways have you found yourself acting more like a Pharisee (legalistic, graceless) despite having access to Scripture? To what do you attribute that tendency?**

### **Background:** *The "Son of Man."*

Jesus twice refers to himself, in today's reading alone, as the "Son of Man." This title would have been recognized by religious leaders as an allusion to the prophet Daniel, who led Israel's spiritual journey during exile. In Daniel 7:13–14, Daniel has a vision of the apocalypse (end times) in which he saw "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 a kingdom."

By taking on this title, Jesus identified himself as divine, possessing God's own authority. As the incarnated God, his authority included mastery over spiritual issues, such as forgiving sin. No wonder the religious leaders struggled to

**Background: *The "Son of Man."*** (Continued)

accept what he was saying. They were not looking for God himself to visit them.

Jesus uses the title later in Mark when he refers to his suffering, death, and resurrection, (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33–34, 45; 14:21 [twice], 41); and his glorious return (8:38; 13:26; 14:62). As such, Mark's use of the term emphasizes Jesus's destiny even more than his identity. The truly human savior must suffer and die. But he is more than just a man, so he must also be raised from the dead and return in glory.

**Read Daniel 7:9–18. List all the descriptions of the "Son of Man" in that passage. Now read Daniel 10:16–19. What similarities do you see? Now turn to Revelation 1:9–16. How does this passage align with Daniel? In what ways does this depiction of Christ change or expand your view of his character and person?**

sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples – for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

**The Question about Fasting**

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus said to them, "The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise,

the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

**Pronouncement about the Sabbath**

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

**Background: *Origins & Practices of the Sabbath***

The word "Sabbath" means "cease," "rest," "complete rest," or "desist," and occurs, in its various forms, one hundred and four times in the Old Testament alone. Though the word does not appear in Genesis, the concept of Sabbath is shown in Genesis 1:1–2:4, where God creates the world and all living things in six days, then rests on the seventh.

Exodus 20:11 clarifies that the seventh day is meant to be the Sabbath day, holy and blessed. The text implies that, because God rested on the seventh day of creation, humankind should follow his example and rest on the seventh day. But over the centuries, as Israel turned from Yahweh, they abandoned the regular practice of Sabbath. The prophets pronounced judgment on their idolatry and unfaithfulness, citing among other sins their profaning of the Sabbath.

After the exile, Nehemiah stressed the importance of the Sabbath celebration (9:14). During the intertestamental period, several hundred years before Jesus, religious leaders attempted to legislate how one must observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath regulations, as interpreted by the Pharisees, lost the intent of the Sabbath prescribed in the Old Testament. Therefore, the rules

**Background: "The Sabbath."** (Continued)

they observed were human made, not God made, and able to be broken.

The Sabbath proclaimed at creation was intended to serve mankind as a holy day, giving blessing, and observing God's rest and restoration. Nothing of Jesus's or his disciples' actions in Mark 2 and 3 were contrary to the purpose and intent of the Sabbath observance. As such, Jesus was not rewriting the law, but fulfilling and clarifying the original law.

**Do you observe a Sabbath—an intentional time of rest? What does it look like? How do Sabbath rests influence your spiritual life? Your physical and emotional health?**

**The Man with a Withered Hand**

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

**BACKGROUND ON  
THE GOSPEL OF MARK**

**The Lord of the Sabbath** (From Theology of Work )

( <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/mark/rhythms-of-work-rest-and-worship/the-lord-of-the-sabbath-mark-223-36> )

Mark 1:21-34, makes it clear that the Sabbath was very integrated into the weekly rhythms of Jesus. The clash that takes place between Jesus and the Pharisees is not over whether to observe the Sabbath but over

how to observe it. For the Pharisees, the Sabbath was primarily defined in negative terms. What, they would ask, is prohibited by the commandment to do no work (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15)? To them, even the casual action of the disciples in picking ears of grain constitutes a kind of work and thus ignores the prohibition. It is interesting that they describe this action as "not lawful" (Mark 2:24), even though such a specific application of the fourth commandment is lacking in the Torah. They regard their own interpretation of the law as authoritative and binding, and do not consider the possibility that they might be wrong. Even more objectionable for them is Jesus' act of healing (Mark 3:1-6), which is depicted as the key event leading the Pharisees to plot against Jesus.

By contrast with the Pharisees, Jesus regards the Sabbath positively. The day of freedom from work is a gift for humanity's good. "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Moreover, the Sabbath affords opportunities to exercise compassion and love. Such a view of the Sabbath has good prophetic antecedent. Isaiah 58 links the Sabbath with compassion and social justice in the service of God, culminating with a description of God's blessing on those who will "call the Sabbath a delight" (Isaiah 58:13-14). The juxtaposition of compassion, justice, and Sabbath suggests that the Sabbath is most fully used as a day of worship by the demonstration of compassion and justice. After all, the Sabbath itself is a remembrance of God's justice and compassion in delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:15).

The first Sabbath account (Mark 2:23-28) is triggered by the disciples' action of picking ears of grain. While Matthew adds that the disciples were hungry, and Luke describes their action of rubbing the ears of grain between their hands before eating them, Mark simply describes them as picking the grain, which conveys the casual nature of the action. The disciples were probably absently picking at the seeds and nibbling them. The defence that Jesus offers when challenged by the Pharisees seems a little strange at first, because it is a story about the house of God, not the Sabbath.

Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God,

when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions. (Mark 2:25–26)

Scholars are divided over how — or even whether — Jesus’ argument works according to principles of Jewish exegesis and argumentation. The key is to recognize the concept of “holiness.” Both the Sabbath and the house of God (with its contents) are described as “holy” in Scripture. Sabbath is sacred time, the house of God is sacred space, but lessons that may be derived from the holiness of one may be transferred to the other.

Jesus’ point is that the holiness of the house of God does not preclude its participation in acts of compassion and justice. The sacred spaces of earth are not refuges of holiness *against* the world, but places of God’s presence *for* the world, for his sustenance and restoration of the world. A place set apart for God fundamentally *is* a place of justice and compassion. “The sabbath [and by implication, the house of God] was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Matthew’s version of this account includes the detail, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” from Hosea 6:6 (Matthew 12:7). This makes explicit the point that we see with more reserve in Mark.

The same point emerges in the second Sabbath controversy, when Jesus heals a man in a synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). The key question that Jesus asks is, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” The silence of the Pharisees in the face of this question serves as a confirmation that the Sabbath is honoured by doing good, by saving life.

How does this apply to our work today? The Sabbath principle is that we must consecrate a portion of our time and keep it free from the demands of work, allowing it to take on a distinctive character of worship. This is not to say that the Sabbath is the only time of worship, nor that work cannot be a form of worship itself. But the Sabbath principle allows us time to focus on God in a different way than the working week allows, and to enjoy his blessing in a distinctive way. Crucially, too, it gives us space to allow our worship of God to manifest itself in social compassion, care, and love. Our worship on the Sabbath flavors our work during the week.

## The Paralytic Man (Mark 2:1-12) (From Theology of Work )

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/mark/kingdom-and-discipleship/the-paralytic-man-mark-21-12>

The story of Jesus healing the paralytic man raises the question of what the theology of work means for those who do not have the ability to work. The paralytic man, prior to this healing, is incapable of self-supporting work. As such, he is dependent on the grace and compassion of those around him for his daily survival. Jesus is impressed by the faith of the man’s friends. Their faith is active, showing care, compassion, and friendship to someone who was excluded from both the financial and relational rewards of work. In their faith, there is no separation between being and doing.

Jesus sees their effort as an act of collective faith. “When Jesus saw *their* faith he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’” (Mark 2:5). Regrettably, the *community* of faith plays a vanishingly small role in most Christians’ work lives in the modern West. Even if we receive help and encouragement for the workplace from our church, it is almost certain to be *individual* help and encouragement. In earlier times, most Christians worked alongside the same people they went to church with, so churches could easily apply the Scriptures to the shared occupations of labourers, farmers, and householders. In contrast, Western Christians today seldom work in the same locations as others in the same church. Nonetheless, today’s Christians often work in the same *types* of jobs as others in their faith communities. So there could be an opportunity to share their work challenges and opportunities with other believers in similar occupations. Yet this seldom happens. Unless we find a way for *groups* of Christian workers to support one another, grow together, and develop some kind of work-related Christian community, we miss out on the communal nature of faith that is so essential in Mark 2:3-12.

In this brief episode, then, we observe three things: 1) work is intended to benefit those who can’t support themselves through work, as well as those who can; 2) faith and work are not separated as being and doing, but are integrated into action empowered by God; and 3) work done in faith cries out for a community of faith to support it.