

Mark 2.1-3.6: Five Controversies

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This passage contains five stories, each of which contains a controversy concerning Jesus' authority. Two of the stories, the first and last, are miracle stories with a twist, and the central three stories fall into the category of the pronouncement story—one that ends with Jesus making a memorable, authoritative statement.

Read Mark 2.1-12: Jesus heals a paralytic

- This story is the fifth in a series of healing stories and the first in the series of controversies, so it serves as a pivot in the text.
1. Examine the structure of this story: it begins with a physical illness, contains the central controversy over the forgiveness of sins, and ends with the physical healing of the man. What comparisons should we draw between physical and spiritual healing? Does the Bible attribute physical illness to sin?
 2. David Hewitt writes that, according to Jewish tradition, not even the Messiah could forgive sins. If this statement is true, then the Pharisees' accusation of blasphemy becomes even more understandable. Look at Jesus' rebuke of the unspoken accusations in vs. 8-10. What authority is Jesus claiming, and why does he choose this time to make such a direct, public claim?
 3. Clement of Alexandria makes this comment on Jesus' healing:

The physician's art, according to Democritus, heals the diseases of the body; wisdom frees the soul from its obsessions. But the good Instructor, Wisdom, who is the Word of the Father who assumed human flesh, cares for the whole nature of his creature. The all-sufficient Physician of humanity, the Savior, heals both body and soul conjointly. "Stand up," he commanded the paralytic; "take the bed on which you lie, and go home"; and immediately the paralytic received strength.

Jesus' healing demonstrates his care for both the physical and spiritual health of the paralytic. How does (or should) our church respond likewise to our community within the church and outside of it?

Read Mark 2. 13-17: the Calling of Levi

4. This passage contains a progression from Levi's (aka Matthew's) calling to Jesus' dinner with sinners and tax collectors. Why does the gospel include Levi's calling in this passage rather than beginning with the dinner?
5. According to David Hewitt's commentary, tax collectors were "not allowed to enter the synagogue or give evidence in court. They were considered as unclean as a leprosy sufferer" (47). Given Jesus' healing of a leper in the previous chapter, what does this quote tell us about Matthew's calling?

6. Saint Jerome responds to this passage by saying

There are two ways of interpreting the saying “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” The first is by analogy with the accompanying phrase: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” The other way is to put a more literal construction on the statement, like this: Since no one is perfectly righteous, Christ has not come to call those who are not there, but the multitudes of sinners who are there, with whom the world is filled, remembering the Psalm which says “Help, O Lord, for there is no longer any one who is godly.”

Discuss Jerome’s interpretation.

Read Mark 2. 18-22: Fasting

7. During Jesus’ day, the Pharisees were fasting two days a week, Monday and Thursday—both of the market days in Jerusalem. How would you summarize Jesus’ attitude toward fasting? Does he forbid it or command it? What are the benefits and dangers of fasting? (from Hewitt)
8. Look at the three analogies of the bridegroom, the patched garment, and the wineskins. What is the connection between these three disparate examples? What could the new patch and the new wine symbolize? What should we do with the old garments and the old wine, metaphorically speaking?

Read Mark 2.23-3.6: Two Sabbath stories

Fun fact: Jews were forbidden to wear heavy shoes on the Sabbath because they would be carrying a burden.

9. In the first story, Jesus’ answers for his disciples’ picking grain on the Sabbath. How does he justify his response? What does his pronouncement tell us about our own attitude toward the Sabbath? What kind of authority does Jesus claim here?
10. In the second story, Jesus heals a man’s withered hand in the synagogue. Compare the people’s reaction to this healing with their reaction to the healing of the paralytic. Why is this time so different? How does Jesus respond to the crowd and why this response?
11. Mark 3.6 reveals the first of the murder plots against Jesus’ life: the Pharisees conspire with the Herodians, supporters of Rome and normally *not* friends of the Pharisees. What does this unusual alliance tell us about Jesus’ ministry and authority with the people? How does this incident also reveal Jesus’ authority over the Sabbath?