demons from revealing his identity. Now for the first time, he attempts to suppress the knowledge that he has healed someone and, therefore, orders the man to "say nothing to anyone."

Nevertheless, Jesus' efforts fail, and once again he must withdraw. The man disobeys the order and publicizes the miracle. Consequently, Jesus retreats into the uninhabited countryside.

By disobeying Jesus' urgent command, the man shows a profound lack of faith. At the beginning of the story, the man expresses at least some confidence in Jesus by saying, "You can make me clean." Once Jesus cleanses him, however, the man breaks faith. Jesus' order is emphatic, "See that you say nothing to anyone." Yet, the man violates it utterly. He proclaims the news "a great deal" and spreads the word. Later, Mark will emphasize that faith primarily consists of persistently seeking and following Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:

Should some miracles be kept quiet? Do miracles sometimes generate the wrong kind of publicity and confuse people about what Christianity actually is?

7. Mark 2:1–12

And when he came back into Capernaum after some days, it was learned that he was at home. And many gathered so there was no longer room, not even in the area by the door, and he was speaking the word to them. And some came bringing to him a paralyzed man who was being carried by four people. And when they could not bring the man to him because of the crowd, they removed the
roof where he was, and when they had dug through, they let down the cot where the paralyzed man was lying. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Child, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there and thinking in their hearts, “Why does this fellow talk this way? He is committing blasphemy! Who can forgive sins, except the one God?” And at once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were thinking this way in themselves, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? What is easier: to say to the paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Get up, and pick up your cot and walk’? But so you know that the son of humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins.” He said to the paralyzed man, “I say to you, get up, pick up your cot, and go off to your house.” And he got up, and at once, picking up the cot, he went out before everyone, so all were beside themselves and glorified God, saying, “We never saw something like this!” (2:1-12).

Within the overall structure of Mark’s gospel, this story makes a bridge between two sections. The story of the healing of the paralytic, climaxes the series of miracles which begins with the exorcism in 1:21-28. At the same time, the controversy between Jesus and the scribes introduces a series of confrontations between Jesus and his detractors. This series climaxes in 3:1-6 when Jesus performs a healing on the Sabbath and, as a result, the Pharisees and Herodians decide to kill him.

Mark probably combined two narratives to produce 2:1-12. When people told and retold stories about Jesus, it seems likely they would have simplified and so not recounted an argument between Jesus and his critics within a larger miracle narrative. Be that as it may, it is striking that the controversy between Jesus and his critics over who can forgive sins (2:5b-10a) fits awkwardly into the larger story. Indeed, the section ends with an incomplete sentence (“But so you know that the son of humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins”). Interestingly, Mark brackets the section with the same words, “He said to the paralyzed man.” It also seems very probable that Mark inserted a story in which Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins within
a story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man. To make the insertion, Mark introduced the controversy after the words, “He said to the paralyzed man,” and then repeated these same words when he resumed the description of the miracle.

The story of the healing of the paralyzed man emphasizes that Jesus deliberately works the miracle in public. The narrative stresses that an enormous number of witnesses are present. Indeed, the crowd is so great that there is no room even by the door, and the four men who are carrying the paralytic are reduced to digging through the roof and lowering the man down the hole. Moreover, the story underlines the fact that the miracle is worked in plain view of all, “Picking up the cot, he went out before everyone.” Indeed, the purpose of the miracle is, at least in part, to give a visible demonstration to Jesus’ critics that he has the power to forgive sins.

Coming right after the cleansing of the leper, the public character of the healing is striking. In the earlier story, Jesus orders the leper to “say nothing to anyone.” Now immediately afterward, Jesus himself performs a public healing.

In this second story, Jesus’ action primarily provokes rejection rather than popularity. Thanks to Mark’s editing, Jesus works the miracle in response to objections from his critics. To be sure, everyone then glorifies God. However, within the larger context, this is the first of a series of confrontations between Jesus and his opponents which only a chapter later provokes them to decide to kill him.

In the story, Jesus works the public miracle in response to exemplary faith, and this faith is shown by persistence in coming to Jesus. The story stresses the difficulty which the four people who are seeking the miracle have in reaching him. They are not able to get through the crowd. Consequently, they take the extreme step of lugging the paralytic up onto the roof, digging through it and lowering the cot down the hole. The persistence shows their trust in Jesus, and the story stresses that it is this
faith that leads Jesus to act. It was "when Jesus saw their faith" that he turned his attention to helping the man.

The story also suggests that Jesus will willingly work a public miracle if only it either provokes public rejection or else bears public witness to someone's faith.

This story introduces the title "son of humanity" which subsequently will be important in the narrative. Jesus declares that, as the son of humanity, he has authority to forgive sins. Later in the gospel, as we shall see, Mark uses this title to balance the designation "Messiah." Jesus is both the Messiah and the "son of humanity."

For Mark and his readers, the title, son of humanity, suggested that Jesus was a human being and also that he was the one through whom God would judge and rule the world. In both Hebrew and Aramaic the phrase "son of humanity" is a synonym for "human being." Even though Mark wrote in Greek, it is clear that he and his readers were aware of this meaning. In 3:28, Jesus declares, "All sins and blasphemies will be forgiven to the sons of human beings." Here, the term in the plural can only mean "people." The title "son of humanity," also appears in Dan 7:13-14 and refers to a superhuman figure at the final judgment who receives dominion over the world. Later, Mark's gospel will apply this title to Jesus as the one who will return in glory to judge the world and then reign over it (8:38, 13:26-27).

Because Jesus is both a human being and the final judge of the world, he has authority to forgive sins on earth. Since he is human, he experiences the sufferings and temptations that people face and so is in a position to set standards. As the final judge, he will ultimately be the one who will declare who is innocent and who is guilty. This gives him the right, even now, to pronounce forgiveness by God's authority. His critics are correct when they object, "Who can forgive sins, except the one God?" What they do not realize is that Jesus is God's Son and rightly exercises God's prerogatives.
Questions for Reflection:

Would God be in a position to judge us if he never faced the sufferings and temptations we do? Do Christians today have the authority to pronounce forgiveness in God's name? Will we heal people if we pronounce forgiveness? To exercise this authority properly, do we need to experience the sufferings of the sinner and his or her victims? If we exercise this authority, will we often experience rejection?

8. Mark 2:13–28

And he went back out beside the sea. And all the crowd came to him, and he taught them. And as he was passing by, he saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him. And he dined in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his students, for there were many, and they were following him. And when the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they kept saying to his students, “He eats with the tax collectors and sinners!” And when Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are healthy have no need of a doctor, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (2:13–17).

And John’s students and the Pharisees were fasting. And they came and said to him, “For what reason do John’s students and the students of the Pharisees fast, but your students do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The groom’s party cannot fast while the groom is with them, can they? For as long as they have the groom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the groom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. No one sews a patch from a piece of unshrunken cloth on an old
garment. Otherwise, the fullness of the new will pull away from the old, and there will be a worse tear. 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 new wine is put into new skins” (2:18–22).

And while he was passing by through the grain fields on the Sabbath, his students began to make their way by picking the heads of grain. And the Pharisees said to him, “See what they are doing on the Sabbath! It is not allowed!” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he himself was hungry along with those who were with him, how he went into God’s house during the high priesthood of Abiathar and ate the bread of presentation which it is not allowed for anyone except the priests to eat, and he gave it also to those who were with him?” And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. So then, the son of humanity is Lord even of the Sabbath” (2:23–2:28).

Much of the specific material here was relatively unimportant to Mark and his intended readers. The issue of whether it was allowable to pick grain on the Sabbath probably did not concern Mark’s Gentile audience. Similarly, the attack on followers of Jesus for not fasting was no longer even accurate. As the story itself makes clear, once Jesus was dead, the early church did fast.

For the gospel as a whole, these stories are significant because they suggest that relations between Jesus and his critics are deteriorating. In each of these stories, there is a confrontation between Jesus and his faultfinders. Accordingly, the theme of opposition which we first encounter in the story of the healing of the paralytic intensifies. Mark makes the threat more menacing by attributing it to a continuing source, namely the Pharisees. Some of the references to the Pharisees in these stories are problematic. The two phrases “the scribes of the Pharisees” and “the students of the Pharisees” are awkward and unclear. In the sources Mark used, the criticism of Jesus’ asso-
ciation with sinners probably came simply from the scribes, and
the criticism of not fasting came simply from John's students.
Mark added references to the Pharisees in order to emphasize
a growing threat. In keeping with the growing menace, Mark
gives us the first clear intimation of Jesus' approaching death.
Jesus is the bridegroom, and "the days will come when the
groom will be taken away."

Once again, we encounter the theme that Jesus is the son
of humanity and, therefore, has authority over sin. Because as
"the son of humanity" he is a human being and the final judge
of the world, he is also Lord of the Sabbath. Hence, he can
excuse his followers from the need to obey the Sabbath regula-
tions.

It appears that Mark added this concluding comment about
the son of humanity's authority to the story of picking grain on
the Sabbath. The previous sentence, "The Sabbath was made
for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath" would provide an
admirable conclusion to the narrative. By contrast, the follow-
ing comment about the son of humanity does not follow logi-
cally and so seems out of place. Perhaps then, Mark himself
added it to a preexisting story.

Questions for Reflection:

Does much of the Bible deal with issues which at least
superficially are no longer relevant? Do such portions of
Scripture still contain a deeper message that remains sig-
nificant? If so, how can we find that message? What did
Jesus say to his own time when he ate with social outcasts?
What does he say to us?