9. Mark 3:1–6

And again he went into the synagogue, and a person was there who had a paralyzed hand. And they were watching him carefully to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath, so they could bring charges against him. And he said to the person who had the paralyzed hand, “Stand up, and go to the center.” And he said to them, “Is it allowable on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And after he looked around at them with anger, grieved over their hardheadedness, he said to the person, “Hold out your hand.” And he held it out, and his hand was restored. And at once the Pharisees went out and plotted against him with the Herodians in order to destroy him (3:1–6).

With this story Mark brings the series of conflicts between Jesus and his religious critics to a climax. At the end of this confrontation Jesus’ critics withdraw and start plotting to kill him.

This story has striking similarities to the one in 2:1–11 which begins the series. In both 2:1–11 and here, Jesus spars with religious lawyers over his own authority. In the first story, the issue is whether Jesus has the right to forgive sins. Here it is whether he may heal on the Sabbath. In both stories, Jesus asks a confrontational question. In the first, the question is whether it is easier to say someone’s sins are forgiven or to heal. In the second, the question is whether it is permissible to do good on the Sabbath. Then, in both accounts, he heals a paralyzed man.

This last story in the series reinforces the point that the first story makes: Jesus is willing to work public miracles as long as they incite rejection. Here, Jesus deliberately works a miracle before his enemies. However, the miracle is the culmination of an increasingly bitter confrontation and sets in motion a plot against him. Thus, at the opening of the story, Jesus’ enemies are waiting to see if he will work a miracle “so they could bring
charges against him.” Jesus shows that he knows their agenda by raising the question of whether what he is doing is legal. When they are silent, he looks at them with disappointment and anger. Consequently, the following miracle is a deliberate provocation and, not surprisingly, results in a conspiracy to do away with him.

Questions for Reflection:

Can religious people often be narrow and “hardheaded”? What leads to such lack of compassion and flexibility? Will a Christian who challenges these attitudes normally experience rejection, even if he or she does great things in Jesus’ name?

10. Mark 3:7–12

And Jesus with his disciples withdrew toward the sea, and a great throng from Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem and from Idumea and across the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon followed, a great throng, since they were hearing how much he was doing. They came to him, and he spoke to his students so that a boat might stand ready for him on account of the crowd so they would not crush him (for he healed many, so that all who had afflictions would fall on him in order to touch him). And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw him, were falling down before him and would shout, “You are God’s Son.” And he reprimanded them a lot so they would not make him known (3:7–12).

This long summary concludes a major section of the gospel (1:14–3:12) by reemphasizing that Jesus withdraws after working public miracles and tries to hide his identity as God’s Son to avoid public acclaim. Near the beginning of the section,
Jesus muzzles unclean spirits who proclaim publicly that he is “God’s Holy One,” and withdraws as soon as he works wonders that would make him popular (1:21–29). Then, he insists publicly that he is a human being (“son of humanity”) and deliberately incites opposition. Here, at the end of the section he again works miracles with reluctance. Immediately after he heals the withered hand, he withdraws toward the sea, but cannot escape the crowds. They have heard “how much he was doing” and demand healing. As Jesus confronts the evil spirits, they try to expose his identity, and he must silence them. Significantly, Mark ends the section, not with an account of a single healing, but with a summary of numerous ones. He suggests that in this part of the gospel Jesus’ constant concern is to keep his true identity hidden to avoid fanning public enthusiasm.

This summary also helps prepare for the next major section when Jesus begins to reveal to his intimate students who he is and starts to teach them (and the reader) that he and his followers must patiently endure.

Questions for Reflection:

Can someone proclaim publicly that Jesus is God’s Son and yet use that proclamation to mislead people about what the Christian message is? Should we sometimes ask such people to stop their preaching?

11. Mark 3:13–19

And he went up on the mountain, and he summoned those whom he wanted, and they went away to him. And he appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to
preach and to have authority to drive out demons: Peter (the name he also gave to Simon) and James, the son of Zebedee, and John, James's brother (and to them he gave the names “Boanerges, ” that is “Sons of Thunder”) and Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas and James, Alphæus’s son, and Thaddæus and Simon the Zealous and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him (3:13–19).

Mark begins a new section of the gospel by emphasizing that Jesus chooses some people to be his intimate students, and this choice separates them from the world. Jesus withdraws by going up on a mountain. Then he summons twelve, and they go away to him. Their role now is to be with him and to share his authority and ministry.

Mark's original Christian readers would have tended to identify with the disciples, especially with Peter. The disciples answer Jesus' summons and share in his ministry. Peter is the first disciple Jesus calls in Mark's gospel and the first in the list of the twelve. To some degree, each of Mark's intended Christian readers also had answered a summons from Jesus and at least aspired to share in his ministry. Accordingly, they would have assumed that what happens to the disciples in general and Peter in particular was especially relevant.

Consequently, the mistakes that these disciples make in the subsequent narrative would have served as warnings to the original readers to do better.

Questions for Reflection:

In what ways does following Jesus separate us from the world? How are Christians today like the twelve apostles in Mark's gospel? How are we different? Can we identify with them?
12. Mark 3:20–35

And he went into a house, and again a crowd assembled so that they could not even eat food. And when his relatives heard, they came out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is beside himself.” And the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying, “He is in the grasp of Beelzebul,” and, “By the ruler of the demons he drives out demons.” And when he had summoned them, he spoke to them using comparisons: “How can Satan drive out Satan? And if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen against himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is at an end. Indeed, no one can enter into a strongman’s house to loot his stuff unless they first tie up the strong man, and then they will loot his house. Truly, I say to you that all sins and blasphemies will be forgiven to the sons of human beings, no matter how much they blaspheme. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit does not ever have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin,” because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit” (3:20–30).

And his mother and his brothers and sisters came, and standing outside, they sent word to him that they were summoning him. Now a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Look, your mother and your brothers and your sisters are asking for you outside.” And in reply he said to them, “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?” And looking around at those who were sitting about him in a circle, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters; whoever does God’s will, this is my brother and sister and mother!” (3:31–35).

In this section, Mark has placed together a number of stories and sayings which were originally separate. We begin with the disturbing—and, therefore, surely historical—narrative that Jesus’ family thought he was out of his mind and tried to seize him. Next, we have a charge from Jesus’ critics that he drives out demons by Beelzebul. To this, Jesus gives two
different replies: First, Satan would not cast out Satan. Second, Jesus can only cast out Satan after tying him up. Then Mark includes the saying about the sin against the Spirit. In other early Christian literature this saying occurs separately (Luke 12:10; Gospel of Thomas 44). To place this saying within the story, Mark adds the words, “because they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” Finally, we have the story that when Jesus’ family seeks him, Jesus says that his real family is those who do God’s will.

The theme of the section Mark has produced by combining this material is that Jesus’ disciples replace his natural family. This section discredits Jesus’ natural mother and siblings. At the beginning of the passage, they assume he is crazy and set out to seize him, and at the end when they actually arrive, Jesus declines to speak with them. Mark stresses that Jesus’ natural family remains “outside.” Indeed, by sandwiching the other material between these glimpses of Jesus’ family, Mark implies that Jesus’ mother and siblings are scarcely better than the scribes who charge that Jesus is in league with Satan. By contrast, at the climax of the section, Mark notes that the disciples are “sitting about” Jesus, and Jesus insists that his students who do God’s will are his true “brother and sister and mother.” Of course, Mark’s readers can choose to be part of this family.

Questions for Reflection:

Does faithfulness to Jesus sometimes make people act in ways that others consider to be insanity? What does it mean to be part of Jesus’ family?