



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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Part 6

Mark 2:23-3:6

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REVIEW of Mark 1:1-2:22

We've now seen Jesus facing conflict over:

Forgiving the paralytic's sins

Eating with the wrong people

Not fasting

In this lesson, we will see two new stories about conflict, both related to the observance of the Sabbath.

We have also seen the way this conflict is escalating:

in 2:7, Jesus' opponents simply questioned him in their hearts

in 2:15, Jesus' opponents asked the disciples about their behavior

In this lesson, we will see Jesus' opponents question Jesus himself for the first time, and then, we will see Jesus' opponents laying in wait for him, and then plotting how they might kill him.

Mark 2:23 (NIV)

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain-fields and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

“Sabbath”

The Sabbath was instituted by God.

It is part of Creation week:

Genesis 2:2-4 – “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” (NIV)

It is set within the Ten Commandments:

Exodus 20:8-10 – “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates.” (NIV)

It is the first of Israel’s appointed feasts:

Leviticus 23:3 – “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.” (NIV)

The prophets commended those who upheld Sabbath:

Isaiah 56:2 – “Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hands from doing any evil.” (NIV)

Only life-threatening situations or dire personal needs could supersede the Sabbath law.

The punishment for violating Sabbath was the death penalty.

Hence, “work” must be defined with great care!

Mark 2:23 (NIV)

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.

“Sabbath” (continued)

Given God’s command regarding Sabbath, concern for it is commendable!

But the approach the religious leadership took was: Construct a fence around the law that is wider and more extensive than the law itself, to ENSURE, as far as possible, safe compliance with it.

In some ways, their approach was similar to the “factors of safety” that are built into engineering specifications today, like speed limits and load limits that are WELL within actual “breaking points”, to ensure safety!

Unfortunately, God’s intentions and purposes were often forgotten in striving to keep every particular of this “fence” around the Sabbath law.

Often, the rules even went BEYOND God’s original intention.

“pick some heads of grain”

This is emphatically NOT stealing, by law:

Deuteronomy 23:25 – “If you enter your neighbor’s grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain.”
(NIV)

Mark 2:24 (NIV)

The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

“Pharisees”

Again, these are shown as Jesus’ primary opponents, as we last saw in the discussion about fasting.

“unlawful on the Sabbath”

As we saw in the Ten Commandments ... but there is far more detail in the “Mishna on the Sabbath”, a rabbinic interpretation which noted 39 MAJOR works prohibitions.

Mark 2:25-26

(NIV)

He answered, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

“what David did”

This is a reference to an Old Testament story:

1 Samuel 21:1-6 – “David went to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, ‘Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?’ David answered Ahimelech the priest, ‘The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, “No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.” As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.’ But the priest answered David, ‘I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here – provided the men have kept themselves from women.’ David replied, ‘Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men’s things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!’ So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.”

Notice that in this story, the priest is Ahimelech, not Abiathar.

Interestingly, in the parallel accounts, Matthew 12:4 and Luke 6:4, the reference by name is dropped, as if to correct the detail!

It is not clear if Jesus cites this as “Sabbath breaking” (the bread was indeed removed on the Sabbath), or simply to demonstrate that hunger and need justified otherwise unacceptable behavior.

Mark 2:25-26

(NIV)

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“what David did” (continued)

There is an allegory here about AUTHORITY.

David and his companions = Jesus and his disciples.

David had the authority, as king, to eat illegally and allow his companions to do so.

Jesus is claiming the same authority for himself and HIS companions (the disciples).

Jesus is also, thereby, taking responsibility for his disciples' conduct.

Mark 2:27 (NIV)

Then he said to them,
“The Sabbath was made
for man, not man for the
Sabbath.”

“made for man”

We need to consider if what is intended is REALLY to allow the Jews to simply set aside the Sabbath law whenever necessary.

Or, does it affirm that Sabbath is a gift from God for the benefit of humanity to enjoy? This was, in fact, part of the Pharisaic understanding of Sabbath.

Perhaps, Jesus is simply reminding the Pharisees here of their own teaching.

Mark 2:28 (NIV)

“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

“Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”

Remember: Son of God = kingly human ruler, Son of Man = otherworldly authoritarian figure.

If, instead, we took “Son of Man” to be a symbol for humanity, it would imply that perhaps Jesus really was allowing the Jews to simply set aside the Sabbath law whenever necessary.

This is NOT a possible meaning within Judaism.

Rather, this is again a matter of AUTHORITY.

Nowhere else does Jesus imply that the Sabbath law is irrelevant for humanity, or to be simply ignored.

But Jesus DOES have authority to re-interpret “Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy”.

He claims it IS honoring the Sabbath to feed the hungry – human need comes first.

Jesus says, essentially, “As Cosmic Lord (Son of Man), I declare Sabbath to be all about preserving life”. This is important in the next story, as well.

Jesus did NOT end Sabbath, but invited everyone into LIFE in it!

Mark 2:28 (NIV)

“So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

“Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (continued)

The Old Testament Sabbath practiced by the Jews in Jesus' day was NOT “choose any day to rest”.

It was EXACTLY, and PRECISELY, the seventh day.

The earliest Jewish Christians celebrated Sabbath on Saturday and the Resurrection on Sunday.

Later Christians shifted “Sabbath” to Sunday, as a day to both rest and celebrate the Resurrection together.

Paul may be writing to address this specific development in the book of Romans:

Romans 14:5 – “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” (NIV)

Mark 3:1 (NIV)

Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

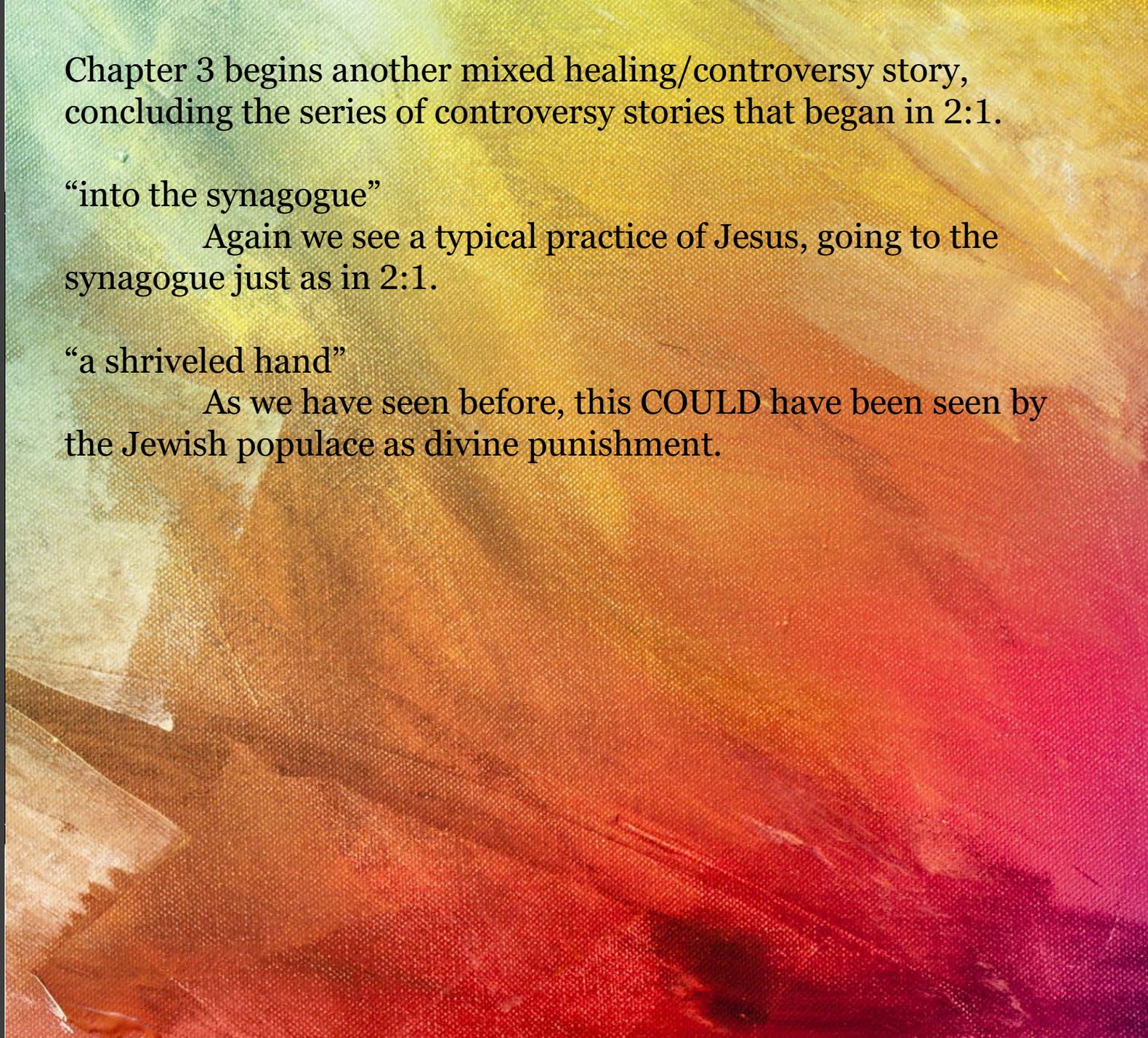
Chapter 3 begins another mixed healing/controversy story, concluding the series of controversy stories that began in 2:1.

“into the synagogue”

Again we see a typical practice of Jesus, going to the synagogue just as in 2:1.

“a shriveled hand”

As we have seen before, this COULD have been seen by the Jewish populace as divine punishment.



Mark 3:2 (NIV)

Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

“some of them”

“Them” probably refers to the Pharisees of 2:24, although it is possible it refers to the noun “synagogue” in the previous verse, as in “some of the members of the synagogue”

“watched him closely”

This implies lying in wait, with the intent to catch Jesus in ANY Sabbath error.

They anticipate catching Jesus in a Sabbath violation – seemingly in awareness of earlier Sabbath healings, perhaps even the event seen in 1:21-31; the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law.

Notice here that no words are exchanged at all – just a calculated wait to be able to formally charge Jesus with breaking the Sabbath.

Mark 3:3 (NIV)

Jesus said to the man
with the shriveled hand,
“Stand up in front of
everyone.”

“Stand up in front of everyone”

Those attending synagogue sat on stone benches around the perimeter on the walls or squatted on mats on the floor.

Jesus has the man get up in front where everyone can see him.

The man has NOT asked for healing, he is simply there to attend synagogue.

Jesus initiates – even provokes – this encounter.

By doing so, Jesus demonstrates himself as the one in control, not those lying in wait for him.

The visual image also portrays lines of conflict – with the man and Jesus in the center and his opponents on the perimeter.

Mark 3:4-5 (NIV)

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

“Which is lawful on the Sabbath?”

The question directly challenges the scribes’ expertise with a “legal” question, which they should be able to provide a ruling on.

“do good or do evil, to save life or to kill”

There was much debate in first century Judaism over what was permissible on the Sabbath – interpretation of the 39 prohibitions in the Mishnah continued in Jesus’ day.

One CONSTANT was – the good of saving a life supersedes the good of keeping the Sabbath.

So Jesus here equates doing good with saving life, evil with destroying life.

The answer to Jesus’ question, even for the scribes, is actually straightforward!

Mark 3:4-5 (NIV)

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“But they remained silent.”

Clearly, more is going on here than a simple legal question – and they know it!

They don’t even say “a shriveled hand is not a life or death situation”, which is what we might expect them to do in response to Jesus’ question.

And that is the gist of the issue – for Jesus, this healing IS saving a life!

But he interprets the law differently from them.

Jesus says, to deprive someone of God’s healing power, to NOT heal, is to do evil/destroy life. Therefore, the opposite, to heal, is to do good/save life.

Jesus comes at the question from the opposite direction – to FAIL to help is to do evil, and doing evil is strictly forbidden on the Sabbath!

From Jesus’ perspective, he is NOT breaking Sabbath, he is KEEPING Sabbath by healing, which is giving life.

When Jesus called himself “Lord of the Sabbath” in the previous episode, he was implying an authority to take action viewed as illegal by his opponents, but NECESSARY to demonstrate his Messianic call to restore people to wholeness, as God intended at Creation.

And this restoration is GOOD – appropriate for Sabbath!

Mark 3:6 (NIV)

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

“Pharisees went out”

This demonstrates, visually, movement AWAY from Jesus, AWAY from God.

“plot with the Herodians”

Now, the RELIGIOUS authorities begin to seek counsel with POLITICAL authorities!

The Herodians were most likely aristocratic Jews who supported the political agenda of Herod Antipas, who had been awarded jurisdiction over Galilee by Caesar Augustus, ruling Judea as a “client state” of Rome.

Pharisees usually disagreed with Herodians, because of their collusion with Rome.

This is, therefore, somewhat of an “unholy alliance”.

“to kill Jesus”

This is the first reference to what lies ahead.

Notice again the movement/escalation of threat, from questioning in their hearts, to questioning the disciples, to questioning Jesus directly, to attempting to entrap Jesus, to a plot to kill him.

Also note the deep irony here – those who are trying to protect the Sabbath, which is all about doing good and saving life, are drawn into seeking Jesus’ death.



Bibliography

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