

Controversies



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Mark 2:1–3:6, Micah 6:6–8, 1 Sam. 21:1–6, Mark 3:20–35, Luke 12:53, Luke 14:26.*

Memory Text: “And He said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath’ ” (*Mark 2:27, 28, NKJV*).

Mark 2:1–3:6 contains five stories that illustrate Jesus’ teaching in contrast to the teaching of the religious leaders. The stories are in a specific pattern in which each successive story links to the one before via a topical parallel. The final story circles around and reconnects with the first one.

Each one of these stories illustrates aspects of who Jesus is, as exemplified by the statements in Mark 2:10, 17, 20, 28. Our studies on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday will delve deeper into the meaning of these accounts and Christ’s statements in them.

Mark 3:20–35 is the subject for study on Wednesday and Thursday.

What we will see, too, is an example of a technique the Gospel writer uses that is called “sandwich stories.” This narrative pattern appears at least six times in Mark. In each case some important aspect of the nature of Jesus and His role as Messiah, or the nature of discipleship, is the focus.

This week, we will read some accounts about Jesus and see what we can learn from them.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 20.

Healing a Paralytic

Read Mark 2:1–12. What was the paralytic looking for when he was brought to Jesus, and what did he receive?

The man was paralyzed; his four friends, therefore, had to carry him to Jesus. After they tore through the roof and let the man down into Jesus' presence, Mark 2:5 notes that Jesus *saw* their faith. How can faith be visible? Like love, it becomes visible in actions, as the persistence of the friends openly illustrates.

The man's obvious need was physical. However, when he comes into Jesus' presence, the first words Jesus pronounces refer to forgiveness of sins. The man speaks not a word during the entire scene. Instead, it is the religious leaders who object (in their minds) to what Jesus has just said. They consider His words blasphemous, slandering God, and taking on prerogatives that belong only to God.

Jesus meets the objectors on their own ground by using a typical rabbinic style of argumentation called "*lesser to greater*." It is one thing to *say* that a person's sins are forgiven; it is another thing to actually make a paralyzed man walk. If Jesus can make the man walk by the power of God, then His claim to forgive sins finds affirmation.

Read Micah 6:6–8. How does this text explain what was happening between Jesus and the leaders?

These religious leaders lost sight of what really mattered: justice, mercy, and walking humbly before God. So obsessed with defending their understanding of God, they were blinded to God's working right before their eyes. Nothing indicated that the men changed their minds about Jesus even though He gave them more than enough evidence to know that He was from God, not only by letting them know that He could read their minds (no simple feat in and of itself) but also by healing the paralytic in their presence in a way that they could not deny.

How can we be careful to avoid the same trap that these men fell into: being so obsessed with the forms of religion that they lost sight of what really mattered in true religion (see James 1:27)?

Calling Levi and the Question of Fasting

Read Mark 2:13–22. Who was Levi, the son of Alphaeus, and why would there be an objection to him becoming a disciple of Jesus?

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were civil servants under the local or Roman government. They were unpopular among the Jewish population in Judea because they often exacted more than required and became rich off their countrymen. A Jewish commentary on religious law, the *Mishnah* tractate *Tohoroth* says, "If taxgatherers entered a house [all that is within it] becomes unclean."

Thus, it is not surprising that the scribes inquire disapprovingly, "Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

How did Jesus respond to their question? He doesn't reject it. Instead, He turns it on its head, indicating that people who are sick, not who are healthy, need a doctor. He thereby claims the moniker of spiritual doctor, the One who can heal the sin-sick soul. And should not a doctor go where the sick are?

Mark 2:18–22 picks up a new theme. It is the central story of these five stories dealing with controversy. Where the previous section included a feast provided by Levi, this next story revolves around the question of fasting. It consists of a query as to why Jesus' disciples do not fast when John the Baptist's and the Pharisees' do. Jesus responds with an illustration or parable in which He compares His presence to a wedding feast. It would be an extremely odd wedding if the guests all fasted. But Jesus does predict a day when the bridegroom will be taken away, an allusion to the Cross. There will be plenty of time for fasting then.

Jesus continues with two illustrations that highlight the contrast between His teaching and that of the religious leaders—unshrunk cloth on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins. What an interesting way to contrast the teaching of Christ and the religious leaders. It shows just how corrupted the ways of the teachers had become. Even true religion can be turned into darkness if people are not careful.

Who are those who today might be looked upon as the tax collectors were in Jesus' day? How do we adjust our thinking regarding them?

The Lord of the Sabbath

In Mark 2:23, 24, the Pharisees accuse the disciples of breaking the Sabbath. According to Jewish tradition, 39 forms of labor were forbidden on the Sabbath, which, in the Pharisees' minds, included what the disciples had done.

Read Mark 2:23–28. How does Jesus counter the charge brought by the Pharisees?

Jesus responds with the story of David's eating the sacred shewbread (*1 Sam. 21:1–6*). The shewbread was removed on the Sabbath; so, David's journey may well have been an emergency escape on the Sabbath. Jesus argues that if David and his men were justified in eating the shewbread, then Jesus' disciples are justified in plucking and eating grain.

Jesus further indicates that the Sabbath was made for the benefit of humanity, not the other way around, and that the basis for His claim is that He is the Lord of the Sabbath.

Read Mark 3:1–6. How does this story illustrate Jesus' point that the Sabbath was made for humanity?

Again Jesus faces controversy with the religious leaders over the Sabbath. (Notice, however, that the controversy is never over the Sabbath day itself.) The religious leaders want to accuse Jesus if He heals on the Sabbath. Jesus does not shy away from confronting them. He sets up a contrast between doing good or doing harm, saving life or killing. The answer to His question is obvious; doing good and saving life are much more appropriate as Sabbath activities.

Jesus proceeds to heal the man, which angers His opponents, who immediately start to plan His demise. The irony of the story is that those looking to catch Jesus in Sabbath breaking were themselves breaking the Sabbath by plotting His death that same day.

What principles of Sabbath keeping can you take away from these accounts and the challenges that we face in the modern age in keeping Sabbath?

Sandwich Story: Part 1

Read Mark 3:20–35. What connection do you see between the two stories intertwined in this passage?

This passage is the first “sandwich story” in Mark, where one story is begun and then is interrupted by another story, with the first story completed only afterward.

The outer story is about Jesus’ relatives setting out to take charge of Him because they think He is out of His mind (*Mark 3:21*). The inner story is about the scribes from Jerusalem charging Jesus with being in collusion with the devil. (Today’s study focuses on the inner story found in Mark 3:22–30.)

In Mark 3:22, the scribes bring the charge that Jesus’ healing power comes from the devil. Jesus responds first with an overarching question: “How can Satan cast out Satan?” It does not make sense that Satan would work against himself. Jesus proceeds to speak about division within a kingdom, a house, and Satan himself, showing how absurd such division would be for their success. But then the Lord turns the tables and talks about binding a strong man in order to plunder his house. In this last example, Jesus is the thief entering Satan’s house, binding the prince of darkness to set his captives free.

Read Mark 3:28–30. What is the unpardonable sin, and what does that mean?

The unpardonable sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit, calling the work of the Spirit the work of the devil. Notice that in Mark 3:30 the reason Jesus makes His statement in Mark 3:28, 29 is because the scribes are saying that He has an unclean spirit when in reality He has the Holy Spirit. If you call the work of the Holy Spirit the work of the devil, then you will not listen to the Holy Spirit because no one in his or her right mind wants to follow the devil’s guidance.

Why does the fear that you might have committed the “unpardonable sin” reveal that you have not committed it? Why is the fear itself evidence that you haven’t?

Sandwich Story: Part 2

Read Mark 3:20, 21. What experience led Jesus' family to consider Him out of His mind?

A charge of mental instability is quite serious. Typically this arises from experiences where a person is a threat to his or her own safety. Jesus' family felt this way about Him because He was so busy that He did not take time to stop to eat. They set out to take charge of Him, and that is where the outer story of the sandwich breaks off, interrupted by the inner story about the scribes charging Jesus with collusion with the devil.

A strange parallel exists between the outer and inner stories of this sandwich story. Jesus' own family seems to have a view of Him parallel to that of the scribes. The family says He is crazy. The scribes say He is in league with the devil.

Read Mark 3:31–35. What does Jesus' family want, and how does He respond?

This scene may seem strange. If your mother or other family members come to see you, should you not meet with them? The problem was that Jesus' family at the time was not in tune with the will of God. Jesus recognized that truth, and in this passage He redefines family. Those who do the will of God are His brother, sister, and mother. He is the Son of God, and those who align themselves with the will of God become His family.

The two stories of this Markan sandwich story together contain a deep irony. In the inner story, Jesus says that a house divided against itself cannot stand. At first glance, it seems that in the outer story, Jesus' own house—His family—is divided against itself! But Jesus resolves this conundrum by His redefinition of family. His real family are those who do the will of God along with Him (*see Luke 12:53, Luke 14:26*).

Many times throughout history, Christians have found themselves alienated from their own relatives. It is a difficult experience. This passage in Mark reveals that Jesus went through the same trouble. He understands what it is like and can comfort those who feel this often painful isolation.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Levi-Matthew,” pp. 272–280; “The Sabbath,” pp. 281–289, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“When questioned, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days?’ Jesus answered, ‘What man shall there be among *you*, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.’ Matt. 12:10–12.

“The spies dared not answer Christ in the presence of the multitude, for fear of involving themselves in difficulty. They knew that He had spoken the truth. Rather than violate their traditions, they would leave a man to suffer, while they would relieve a brute because of the loss to the owner if it were neglected. Thus greater care was shown for a dumb animal than for man, who is made in the image of God. This illustrates the working of all false religions. They originate in man’s desire to exalt himself above God, but they result in degrading man below the brute. Every religion that wars against the sovereignty of God defrauds man of the glory which was his at the creation, and which is to be restored to him in Christ. Every false religion teaches its adherents to be careless of human needs, sufferings, and rights. The gospel places a high value upon humanity as the purchase of the blood of Christ, and it teaches a tender regard for the wants and woes of man. The Lord says, ‘I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir.’ Isa. 13:12.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 286, 287.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What strategies or practices help you and your local church stay sensitive to silently suffering people like the paralytic in Mark 2?
- 2 Think about how blinded by hatred, tradition, dogma, and religion in general the religious leaders who rejected Jesus had become so that even His miracles didn’t open their minds to Him. How can we as a people be careful that something similar doesn’t happen to us?
- 3 How can your local church become “family” for those whose immediate genetic family may have rejected them over their faith?
- 4 Dwell more on the question of the “unpardonable sin.” In class, discuss what it means and how we can be sure not to commit it.

“Except by Fasting and Prayer”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Fourteen-year-old Payel changed after a 14-year-old friend committed suicide. Once outgoing, she sat quietly in the corner. Then she began to scream, shiver, and shake for no apparent reason. Terrified, she confided that she was being visited by someone who looked like her dead friend.

“Come with me,” the apparition told her. “I want to take you with me.”

Twice Payel tried to leap off a balcony, but her parents stopped her.

In desperation, the parents called Rustam for help. Rustam was a Global Mission pioneer who had planted a church in a previously unentered area of their Asian city. No one in Payel’s family was a Christian except an aunt, and she had told the parents about Rustam. Rustam explained that Payel was not seeing her dead friend but an evil spirit.

“We need to pray to Jesus,” he said.

Rustam took four church members to Payel’s home to pray. But Payel wouldn’t sit still. She screamed, flung her hands up and down, and stomped her feet. The visitors sang hymns, but every time they mentioned the name of Jesus, she shrieked, “Stop! I can’t breathe! Someone’s suffocating me!”

Rustam understood that Payel was possessed. He opened a Bible and read about Jesus casting out demons. He prayed. Then Payel became calm. She sat down, talked, and drank water. Rustam hoped that the spirit had left.

But later that night, the aunt called him at home. “Payel has started screaming and says she sees her friend again,” she said.

Rustam was puzzled. What had gone wrong? Then he remembered the Bible story in which Jesus’ disciples had been unable to cast out a spirit. When they asked why, Jesus replied, “This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (*Matt. 17:21, NKJV*). Rustam called several Global Mission pioneers, and they fasted and prayed for two days. Then he returned to Payel’s house with a group that included a Seventh-day Adventist pastor.

When Payel saw the visitors, she tried to flee. It took four people to hold her down. But they couldn’t keep her quiet. She screamed as the visitors sang hymns for 30 minutes. Then she slipped into unconsciousness as the pastor preached about the power of Jesus from the Bible. Rustam sprinkled water on her face until she woke up. Someone gave her water to drink.

Since that visit, Rustam has returned to worship and pray with Payel and her family every two weeks. Payel has not seen the apparition again. She has returned to her old self.

“We were not ready the first time we visited her,” Rustam said. “We only were ready the second time because Jesus teaches, ‘This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.’”

Thank you for your prayers for Global Mission pioneers who, like Rustam, face huge challenges planting churches among unreached people groups around the world. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers on the Adventist Mission website: bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Mark 2, 3*

Study Focus: *Mark 2:3–12; Mark 3:6, 22–29*

Introduction: This week’s study reviews events in Jesus’ ministry as presented in Mark 2 and 3. Jesus’ work is focused on the restoration of people’s lives through the gospel. However, Jesus’ ministry and message were not always well received by certain individuals who wielded great influence in society at that time.

Lesson Themes: In Mark 2 and 3, the author highlights the fact that some religious teachers misapprehended and distrusted Jesus’ message. Within this context, we will examine:

1. The groups, including the Pharisees and scribes, who were hostile to Jesus’ teachings.
2. Some issues of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders.

Part II: Commentary

Jesus’ Ministry Outside the Synagogue

The synagogue was the epicenter of Jesus’ ministry (“He entered *again* into a synagogue” (*Mark 3:1, NASB1995; emphasis added*). However, Jesus was not confined to the synagogue in His ministry. This flexibility is something that distinguishes Him from the masters of His time.

To gain more insight into Jesus’ itinerant ministry, we must look at the structure of the opening chapters of Mark itself. Having looked at Mark 1 last week, we now turn to the content and structure of chapter 2. Mark 2 and 3 seem to comprise one literary unit in Mark’s Gospel. The section starts by noting that Jesus is in the house (*Mark 2:1*); it finishes with a mention of some members of His family (mother and brothers, *Mark 3:31–35*). In between these two narrative segments, Jesus travels to areas near the Sea of Galilee. He goes to a tax office (*Mark 2:14*) and then enters the house of Levi (*Mark 2:15*). Then Jesus proceeds to the grain fields (*Mark 2:23*). Next, He went into the synagogue (*Mark 3:1*). Then He withdraws with His disciples to the sea (*Mark 3:7*), and later He enters another house (*Mark 3:19*).

In short, this segment of Mark’s account highlights that Jesus ministered to people in houses in the city, in the synagogue, and even in rural areas. In this way, we see that Jesus’ served the people. His ministry was

both urban and rural in His region.

Controversial and Hostile Groups

Another preliminary item to consider in Mark 2 and 3 is the hostility of some religious/political leaders toward Jesus and His ministry. Among the groups mentioned in this section are the scribes (*Mark 2:6, 16; Mark 3:22*), the Pharisees (*Mark 2:24, Mark 3:6*), and the Herodians (*Mark 3:6*). They represent three important groups in the Israelite society during Jesus' ministry. (The Sadducees are another group (*Mark 12:18*), but they do not appear in this section of our study.)

The challenge Jesus faces now is not against the forces of darkness. The demons have no active role and no real power against Him in this section of the narrative beyond what is mentioned in Mark 3:11, wherein, the author asserts, the demons fell down prostrate before Jesus. The conflict that Jesus is facing here is against something more concrete: the spiritual leaders or teachers of the nation.

Scholars have attested that Pharisees and scribes were associated with leading positions in Jewish society, from approximately 200 BCE to 100 CE. These two groups were the literate and learned leaders of the nation, living in diverse regions of the country. (See Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001], pp. 4, 40, 52.) In some sense, the scribes and Pharisees represented the scholarly sector of their time.

Michelle Lee-Barnewall points out, "The Pharisees may have arisen from the Hasideans, with their ties to the scribes, as the ones who emphasized the study of the law and obedience to the commandments."—Lee-Barnewall, "Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), p. 218.

Flavius Josephus describes the influence of these scholarly groups and the pressure they exerted in their society in relation to *the traditions* surrounding the Torah. "The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason, the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers."—*The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), p. 355. The Mishnah also reveals certain tensions that existed in relation to the teaching of the scribes. For instance, Sanhedrin 11:3 implies that teachers put more emphasis on the traditions instead of the Torah. "There is greater stringency with regard to traditional rabbinic interpretations of the Torah than with regard to matters of

the Torah” (*Sanhedrin 11:3*). The scribes are also described as “lawyers” (*compare with Matt. 22:35*); in other words, they are “experts in the Mosaic Law.”

The question is, Why are the Pharisees and scribes in permanent collision with Jesus? Or why is He challenging these teachers? Saldarini emphasizes that “the Pharisees’ knowledge of Jewish law and traditions, accepted by the people, [was] the basis of their social standing. Presumably, the scribes and priests also had influence with some of the people. . . . Jesus’ struggle with the Pharisees, scribes and chief priests can be explained most easily as a struggle for influence with the people.”—Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans/Dove, 2001), p. 33.

Matthew 23 offers a clear explanation for why Jesus reproached the religious leaders of His time: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach” (*Matt. 23:2, 3, NRSV*). In contrast to their hypocrisy, Jesus is a practitioner of the principles that He teaches. For this reason, He is a teacher with great authority, not like the scribes. The Pharisees and the scribes, on the other hand, are hypocrites; they do not practice what they profess or teach. As we learned from our study in the first chapter, Mark highlights Jesus not only as someone who teaches and preaches the gospel of God but also as the One who personifies it; that is, He *incarnates* it. In His life, Jesus seeks to alleviate the burden of illness and sin that weighs people down and to free them from the crushing weight of the burden of traditions.

Issues Under Controversy

Other incidents in Mark’s Gospel also reveal further tensions between Jesus and the spiritual leaders. The first incident concerns the paralytic, who was lowered into the presence of Jesus by four men (*Mark 2:3–12*). Mark 2:5 says, “Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralyzed man, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’ ” (*NASB*). In keeping with the pragmatic concept of the gospel that Mark espouses, faith is action. Jesus recognized and honored the faith of the paralytic’s four friends, who, in their actions to move according to their belief, brought their friend to the only One who could help him.

The major controversy in this narrative is Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. What disturbed the scribes was not only that Jesus forgave sins but that He did so in the power and authority of His name. Therefore, this action was described by the scribes as a blasphemous presumption. “In a context in which God alone was seen as being able to forgive sins (Mark 2:7; cf. Luke 7:49), Jesus does so. . . . Jesus is accused of blasphemy

not because he is directly claiming to be God or pronouncing the sacred name of God but because he acts like God.”—Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 119.

Jesus points out clearly that He, as the Son of Man, the Divine One on earth, has authority to forgive sins (*Mark 2:10*). The author of the Gospel stresses an important detail: people, unlike the scribes, recognized that the restoration of the paralytic—including the forgiveness of his sin—was a divine act. “They were all amazed and were glorifying God” (*Mark 2:12, NASB*).

In the next chapter, the scribes attempt a new argument concerning Jesus and His authority or power to liberate and restore demon-possessed people. The religious leaders contend that Jesus “is possessed by Beelzebul” and that “‘He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons’ ” (*Mark 3:22, NASB*).

Unfortunately, the scribes do not recognize Jesus’ work as divine in origin. Instead, they ascribe His works to the power of demons. Because of this malicious and wrongful accusation, Jesus defends His actions as the outworking of the Holy Spirit. Further, Jesus charges the scribes of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Their misconception of the work of Jesus has rendered them “guilty of an eternal sin” (*Mark 3:29, NASB*), “i.e., one with infinite consequences. . . . The unforgivable sin is the stubborn refusal to acknowledge that God is working/has worked in the man Jesus.” Unfortunately, according to Brooks, their stubborn refusal “is not a single act but a habitual action and attitude. The imperfect tense [of *hoti elegon*, 3:30] could be translated, ‘They kept on saying.’ ”—James A. Brooks, *Mark, The New American Commentary*, vol. 23, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), p. 76.

Part III: Life Application

In addition to the misunderstanding of the Son of God by the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus was also misunderstood by members of His own family, namely, His brothers. Ellen G. White writes in the book *The Desire of Ages* concerning Jesus’ brothers: They “desired that He should concede to their ideas, when such a course would have been utterly out of harmony with His divine mission. . . . [They] thought that if He would speak only such things as would be acceptable to the scribes and Pharisees, He would avoid the disagreeable controversy that His words aroused. They thought that He was beside Himself in claiming divine authority, and in placing Himself before the rabbis as a reprover of their sins.” On the same page, she adds, “These things made His path a thorny one to travel.

So pained was Christ by the misapprehension in His own home that it was a relief to Him to go where it did not exist.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 326. On the following page, Ellen G. White appeals to us, “Those who are called to suffer for Christ’s sake, who have to endure misapprehension and distrust, even in their own home, may find comfort in the thought that Jesus has endured the same. He is moved with compassion for them. He bids them find companionship in Him, and relief where He found it, in communion with the Father.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 327.

Ask your class members the following questions: Have you faced any conflict in your inner social circles or among family members because of your beliefs? If yes, how does the notion that Jesus has endured the same offer you comfort?

Notes
