

## Let the Healing Begin!

The authoritative teaching of Jesus was accompanied by powerful action. Very often the power of God is displayed by the way Jesus cast out demons and healed the sick. If Jesus' words amazed the people, his actions left them thunderstruck.

In the synagogue there was a man in the grip of an unclean spirit. He created a disturbance, saying some interesting things. The unclean spirit within the man shouted, "What do you want with us?" Or literally, "What do we have in common?" Then the demon asked Jesus, "Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are – the Holy One of God." Incredible words and an incredible event.

All through the gospels we keep meeting people who had evil spirits or who were possessed by demons. It seems so foreign to us to imagine evil spirits or demon possession.

The Jews, and indeed the entire ancient world, strongly believed in demons and devils. In their view, the whole world and atmosphere were filled with devils. Every part of human life was believed to be ruled by them. In ancient cemeteries, proof has been found that many people, judged to be possessed by demons, would have holes bored in the tops of their skulls to release the evil spirit. In one cemetery, out of over 100 skulls found, 11 were trepanned (had holes drilled in them).

Jesus came to destroy the power of Satan (I John 3:8), so it is not surprising that Satan uses everything in his power to defeat or discredit God's Son. As bizarre as demon possession and unclean spirits might seem to us, we should not try to relegate this incident to some kind of illness or disease. Early in Jesus' ministry he comes into conflict with Satan.

Jesus powerfully cast out the demon. With a shriek and violent shaking of the man, the demon came out. The people were utterly astounded. They asked a question that will become a theme through the early pages of the Gospel of Mark, "Who is this man?" He speaks with authority and now he casts out demons. What do we do with Jesus of Nazareth? No one had ever experienced someone like Jesus. His fame spread quickly.

After healing the demon possessed man in the Synagogue, Jesus and four of his disciples went directly to Peter's house. It so happened that Peter's mother-in-law had a high fever. When Jesus was made aware of this, he healed her. She showed her gratitude by taking care of the needs of Jesus and his disciples.

It is obvious that word about the healing in the synagogue had by this time spread all over the town. Mark tells us that a steady stream of suffering humanity flooded to the door of Peter's house. The people had waited until sundown – when the Sabbath was over - when they could carry their sick friends and family members to him. Jesus responded with compassion. He healed the sick and cast out demons.

One interesting part of the account informs us that when Jesus cast out the demons, he muzzles them, "because they knew he was the Christ." Why would he not want them to reveal this fact? It may be that Jesus wanted to show the people by his words and deeds who he was before he was revealed to the world by others.

## The Power of Solitary Moments

After the excitement of that first day of ministry, Jesus felt compelled to get away for a few hours of prayer and reflection. During the night he rose and went to a solitary place to pray. Jesus knew what we must learn, the power that can be derived from time alone with God. He knew that he could not survive without the help of the Father and so he knew that if he was to keep on giving himself in ministry to people, it was important for him to recharge his batteries.

For what would Jesus be praying that night and early morning? It could be that he was praying for the mass of humanity that had flocked to the door of Peter's house. He could have been overwhelmed by their needs and filled so with compassion that he needed to talk with the Father about them. It could be that he was concerned about the superficial way the people were responding to him. They sought him out for their diseases and illnesses, but had they heard what he said. As important as healing was, he did not come just to heal the physical ailments of humanity. He came to seek and save those who were lost. In those moments, he found direction for his next steps. Peter and the other disciples find Jesus praying and they tell him that everyone is looking for him. They must have been looking for him because more people needed to be healed and more demons needed to be cast out. It is interesting here that Jesus does not go back to the ones who are looking for him. Instead he tells his disciples that they will now take a new course of action. They will leave Capernaum and go to the nearby villages, "so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that he has not come just to heal and cast out demons. Those activities display his love and compassion. He has come to preach and teach others about the love of God and what it means to be a true follower of God. He has come to give guidance to the lives of the people he came to save. As important as it is to relieve the pain of those in the world, it was more important that he leave them a message to live by. He would later say, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul."

So off they go, to the villages around to proclaim the message of hope.

## A Leper Made Whole

Jesus could not escape those who were hurting. He was constantly confronted by those who had all kinds of devastating illnesses and diseases. One of the worst of the diseases in the ancient world was leprosy. The word leprosy in the Bible can refer to a wide variety of skin diseases. These diseases were highly contagious and the Law of Moses required that anyone who had contracted the disease must wear torn clothes, leave his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry, "Unclean, Unclean." As long as he had the disease he was considered unclean and must live alone, outside the camp. People with this devastating disease could often live 20 to 30 years after they contracted it. It was a horrible existence, away from family, society, and any hope of healing. Those who had leprosy were sometimes called the living dead. They were simply alive. They had no real life. As Jesus went from village to village preaching, he came in contact with a leper. We have already described that the Law of Moses would not permit a leper

to have any contact with a healthy human being. Yet this leper must have heard about the power of Jesus and would not be refused. He came to him and fell to his knees and begged him to make him clean. In fact, his request of Jesus was filled with words of faith. "If you are willing, you can make me clean." What a statement! He does not in any way doubt the power of Jesus. To him, it is a given that Jesus has the power to heal him. Neither does he presume that Jesus would want to heal him. He doesn't approach Jesus as if he has the right to be healed, but he makes it known that healing is what he desires, if the Master is willing.

What a sight that poor man must have been. Eaten up with a horrible disease. An outcast, removed from family and friends. Lonely and desperate, he risked breaking the law to get to the only one who could heal him.

Jesus' reaction is beautiful. He does not drive him away. The man had no legal right to approach Jesus, but somehow he knew that Jesus would allow it. As Jesus looked at the man, Mark tells us that he was filled with compassion. Compassion, what a powerful word! Literally in this passage it means that Jesus was hurting inside for the man. He was "all torn up inside." He did not see the man as another mission, or a short stop along the way. He did not see him as a disruption of his schedule. He saw a man who was devastated with physical and social pain. He could not turn away. His heart went out to the man. He felt with him the pain of rejection and loneliness. He could not pass by. His heart was all torn up.

In a moment of compassionate love for this man, Jesus reached out his hand and touched this man who was considered unclean. How long had it been since this man felt a human touch? How long since he had been considered by anyone as anything but unclean. I believe that the man needed the touch of the human hand of the Son of God as much as he needed physical healing.

Jesus told the leper he was willing. He cried out, "Be clean." And immediately the leprosy left the body of that man. Wow! Does Jesus care when I'm sick and lonely? O yes, he cares! That man left that day knowing that Jesus cared!

## Faith That Would Not Be Denied!

The result of Jesus healing the leper was that he was no longer able to enter towns and stay there. The crush of hurting people would be too great. So he stayed in lonely places, but somehow the people kept finding him and coming to him from everywhere.

Finally Jesus returned to Capernaum, and probably went to Peter's house. Word spreads quickly that he has returned and the people start flocking to the house. Jesus spends his time with that large crowd of people preaching to them. So many had gathered to hear him that there was absolutely no room left, not even outside the door.

Life in Palestine was very public. In the morning the door of the house was opened and anyone who wished could come in and out. The door was never shut, unless a person specifically wanted some privacy. An open door was an invitation to come on in. In humbler homes, as this probably was, there was no courtyard or entryway. The door probably opened directly onto the street. In no time the crowd had filled the house and the pavement outside. Everyone wanted to know what Jesus had to say.

There were four friends that desperately needed to see Jesus. They were carrying their friend, a paralytic, urgently trying to get him to Jesus. They knew that if they could only get their friend to Jesus, he would be healed. What incredible faith!

What is so notable about this group of friends is their tenacity. They would not be turned back even though the crowd would not let them through. Isn't that indicative of the crowd? There were probably a large number of good people in that crowd, but they did not see people the way Jesus did. It is incredible that the crowd did not divide and let the friends through. But they did not.

For most people that would be the end of the matter but not for these four men. They were desperate to get their friend to Jesus, so they climbed on to the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching, probably by way of a side staircase. Roofs were flat in Palestine and were often sturdy enough to be used by the family for extra living space if need be. The friends climbed to the roof and then did an incredible thing. They started making a hole in it! Roofs consisted of large wooden beams, covered with thatch and compacted earth in order to shed the rain. It was no small thing that these friends decided to do. Can you imagine what it must have been like in the house as the men were making the hole? Hay and mud must have rained down. Everyone's attention was most likely riveted to the work of the friends. They would not be denied. If they had to dig a hole in the roof, they were going to get their friend to Jesus!

Can you imagine the look on Jesus' face when he saw the paralyzed man being lowered on his mat? Incredible! What faith! Jesus' immediate response to the paralytic was, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

A strange statement, or was it? It seems obvious that the men who went to all the trouble to get their friend to Jesus expected him to heal him physically, not to pronounce his sins forgiven. But there was a deeper need. It was not as if Jesus ignored the obvious, he simply understood the overriding need. Ultimately, spiritual healing is much more important than physical healing.

Sitting there, hearing Jesus' words and viewing this scene were some religious leaders among the Jews. These teachers of the Law were offended that Jesus would claim to have the ability to forgive sins. For anyone but God to claim to have the authority to forgive sins was blasphemy. And if anyone blasphemed God, they had committed a sin punishable by death.

The teachers did not vocalize their outrage, but Jesus, knowing their thoughts, confronted them. Which is easier, he said, to forgive sins or to heal a man? The answer is obvious. To tell a man his sins were forgiven could not be verified. But when a person was healed, it could not be denied. It is important to remember that the Jews closely connected illness or being crippled with sin. Therefore, a real indicator of whether a person was forgiven would be the undeniable fact of this healing.

So Jesus challenged these teachers of the Law. "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins ...." Turning to the man Jesus said, "Take up your mat and go home." The paralytic stood up and took his mat and walked out in view of everyone. Wow! The crowd in the house that day was confronted by what they had just experienced. Who ever heard of anything like this? And the teachers of the Law were reeling. How could this man, who obviously blasphemed God, have possibly healed this paralytic? The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders has only just begun.

## I Surrender All

This is the second incident in a series of five in which Jesus comes into conflict with the religious leaders. Jesus was teaching a large crowd of people who had gathered around him beside the lake. Rabbis often taught people as they walked along, so it is highly possible that Jesus on this occasion was teaching the people when he encountered a tax collector named Levi. Two simple words would alter Levi's life forever. "Follow me." Levi immediately got up and followed.

Levi's immediate response is very notable due to the fact that tax collector's job was highly sought after. It was a sure way to get rich quickly. These jobs were usually secured by some kind of political connection, so to leave such an arrangement had deep ramifications. When he left his booth, he left that life forever. It would be very unusual for him to get such an opportunity a second time.

But more incredible than his leaving the booth was his response to Jesus call. He invited his tax collecting friends and assorted "sinners" to a meal at his home. Jesus and his disciples were present at the party and this caused an uproar among the Jewish leaders. How could he eat with such people? How could he consort with tax collectors and sinners like this?

When Jesus heard about their disgust, he answered powerfully.

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

There is no statement more profound in this gospel than this one. The righteous will not hear him because they are self-righteous. Only those who understand their deep need will respond to this doctor.

## To Fast or Not To Fast

Jesus' critics found two practices that were particularly out of step with their traditions: fasting and the observance of the Sabbath. In the Law of Moses only the fast on the Day of Atonement was required (Lev. 16:29, 31), but after the exile other fast days were added. In New Testament times the stricter Pharisees fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday.

Those who followed John the Baptist and those who followed the way of the Pharisees may have fasted for different reasons, but fasting was a part of the religious observance of both groups. Fasting could accompany repentance, or it could serve as a sign of mourning. Except for the Day of Atonement, fasting was a matter of choice that had become a tradition. But, tradition to many of the Jews held a very prominent place; a place on par with Scripture.

Jesus' answer to their inquiry about why his disciples didn't fast was that fasting is a practice done in connection with funerals not weddings. Jesus is the bridegroom and his disciples are the wedding guests. It is not a time to fast while the wedding feast is going on. There will be plenty of time for fasting later, but now is a time of celebration and joy!

The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away, and on that day they will fast.

At the end of Jesus' explanation are two very brief parables about how dramatically things will change under the Lordship of Jesus. These parables bear on the question of fasting, but beyond that they also bear on the forms of Judaism in general.

In ancient times wine was kept in goatskins. New skins were soft and pliable and would stretch when wine that had not quite completely fermented was put in them. However, old wineskins that had stretched would be brittle and, no longer being pliable, were thus unable to stretch. The gas from the fermenting wine would burst old wineskins, destroying both the wine and the wineskins.

Cloth in ancient times was not made pre-shrunk. After the initial washing the cloth would greatly shrink, so putting a new patch on old cloth in the end would ruin both. Putting new wine into old wineskins and patching an old garment with a new cloth is just as inappropriate as fasting at a wedding feast. In the same way, trying to fit Jesus into the forms of Jewish tradition and dogma is inappropriate. Jesus fulfills and transcends Jewish law and tradition. Thus, the conflict deepens.

## Priority

Jesus once again raises the ire of the Jewish religious leaders when his disciples gleaned some heads of grain on the Sabbath Day. The Pharisees confront Jesus. "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Were Jesus and his disciples really breaking the Law of Moses? Emphatically, no! The Law forbade work on the Sabbath Day, to be sure. But what constituted work was meticulously defined by the Rabbis. They defined 39 different categories of work that would violate the Sabbath Law. In addition to the 39 major categories, there were numerous sub-headings. The interpretation of Sabbath Law by the Jews was massive.

What Jesus violated was their interpretation of Sabbath Law, not the Law itself. The problem was that they could see no difference between Law and their own traditions or interpretations of the Law. To violate their interpretation would be to violate the Law.

Jesus countered their challenge with a challenge of his own. Jesus turned their attention to I Samuel 21:1-6, where David and his companions were hungry and ate the consecrated bread – the twelve loaves baked of fine flour, arranged in two rows or piles on the table in the Holy Place. Although David's actions violated the Law, he was not condemned for it.

It is notable that Jesus does not challenge their interpretation of the Sabbath Laws in making his argument. He simply shows them that sometimes there are extenuating circumstances and that in those cases a higher law takes precedence.

The Pharisees faced a dilemma. If they condemned the disciples, they would also have to condemn David. Jesus concludes, "The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Son of Man is Lord even over the Sabbath."

## Another Sabbath Violation?

This is the last of a series of five conflict stories. Again Mark gives no details concerning the time or geographical location. It is simply another example of how the Jews could not accept Jesus because of their strict forms.

This time the conflict centers on healing. Jesus is in the synagogue and meets a man with a shriveled hand. Given Jesus' previous activities, there was a contingent of Jews looking for a reason to accuse him. It could be that the man was planted by the Jewish leaders to test Jesus.

As the Jews watched closely, Jesus had the man stand in front of everyone. Jesus wanted to make sure that everyone saw the man and got the point. This is a man standing here. He is in need of healing. How about it? "What is lawful to do on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

The hopeful accusers were astonished by his words. They were speechless. They would not give in. They did not truly see the hurting man. They had no compassion!

Jesus knowing their hearts and seeing their smugness reacted with anger. He was deeply distressed. This is not a game. This is a person. Is your interpretation of the law so heartless that you would refuse to help a person on the Sabbath? How could this possibly be viewed as work? How could God's chosen people have been so diminished! They have no real understanding of the Law at all!

Jesus healed the man's hand and the reaction of the Jews was predictable. We have him now! We caught him red handed! He broke the Law! Let's see him get out of this! How sad! They left the synagogue and plotted how they could bring about the death of Jesus, the Messiah.

## **Bible Readings – Questions for Individual and Group Study**

### **Week 3:**

#### **Day 1 – Read Mark 1:21-28**

##### **Demons Cast Out**

1. Spend some time in a Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia researching demons and evil spirits. Where did they come from? Why did Jesus encounter so many?
2. Were demon possessions actually diseases or were people actually possessed by evil spirits? Explain your answer.
3. Do you believe that there is such a thing as demon possession today? Explain.

#### **Day 2 – Read Mark 1:29-37**

##### **The Need to Get Away**

1. What do you find impressive about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law?
2. Why did Jesus not allow the demons to tell everyone that he was the Son of God?
3. What are some indications that it was a normal practice for Jesus to rise early in the morning to pray?
4. Do you believe that Jesus was troubled and so went out to pray or were his prayers more praise for what God had done through him the previous day? Explain.
5. What are some of the lessons you learn from Jesus' example?

#### **Day 3 – Read Mark 1:35-39**

##### **A Change in Plans**

1. Read Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 19:1-10; and Matt. 28:19, 20. How do you combine the teaching of these passages? Should the emphasis be more toward helping others or evangelism? Explain.
2. Why was it important for Jesus to leave the city of Capernaum when he did? Does it trouble you that he left sick people behind?

3. Do some research on leprosy. What were the two most common types in the ancient world?

## Day 4 – Read Mark 1:40-45

### **The Touch of the Master’s Hand**

1. List the things that impressed you about the action and the words of the leper.
2. Why did Jesus not rebuke the man for breaking the Law of Moses? Did Jesus minimize the Law?
3. Look up the word compassion in an English Dictionary. Compare it to the definition of the word as explained in your reading.
4. Read Leviticus 14. What did the leper have to do after he was healed in order to re-enter society?

## Day 5 – Read Mark 2:1-5

### **Amazing Faith**

1. Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone that Jesus had healed him. Why? Why do you think the leper told others anyway?
2. Research Ancient Near-Eastern homes and lifestyles. In what ways was life different then than it is in Western culture today?
3. If you were one of the paralytic’s friends, how would you have responded if faced with these seemingly impossible circumstances?
4. Does this story have a message for us about the way we do evangelism? What are the lessons?

## **Week 4:**

### **Day 1 – Read Mark 2:6-12**

#### **Take Up Your Mat and Go Home!**

1. How would you characterize what the friends did to get their friend to Jesus?
2. Why did Jesus tell the man his sins were forgiven before he healed him? Was he a paralytic because he had sinned?
3. Read the first few verses of John 9. Describe the Jewish understanding of the relationship between sin and sickness. What Old Testament teaching could have caused them this understanding?
4. Why didn't the religious leaders vocalize their concerns about Jesus' apparent blasphemy?
5. What must have been the reaction of the man's friends who brought him to Jesus?

### **Day 2 – Read Mark 2:13-17**

#### **A Profound Statement**

1. What was there about Levi that caused Jesus to stop while teaching the crowd?
2. "Evil companions corrupt good morals." Why didn't Jesus apply that teaching to the party Levi held?
3. What kind of tax collector was Levi? Do some research to better understand the role of tax collectors?
4. What did Jesus mean when he said, "I did not come to call the righteous?"

## Day 3 – Read Mark 2:18-22

### **Of Fasting, Cloth and Wineskins**

1. Explain how wineskins and unshrunk cloth is related to the issue of fasting.
2. How many “fast days” were the Jews required to keep each year?
3. Should disciples of Jesus fast today? Why?

## Day 4 – Read Mark 2:23-28

### **Extenuating Circumstances**

1. Using a concordance, write down and study all the commands concerning the Sabbath in the first five books of the Old Testament. Write down an explanation of the law.
2. Could plucking heads of grain be interpreted as violating the Sabbath Law? Could that be considered harvesting?
3. Why didn't Jesus discuss their interpretation of the Sabbath Laws?
4. Are there situations Christians might face that would allow breaking the Law of Christ? Are there any times when extenuating circumstances make a difference?

## Day 5 – Read Mark 2:1-6

### **How Sad!**

1. Do the Pharisees have a point? Is Jesus violating the Law of Moses? Explain.
2. Why did Jesus ask the man with the shriveled hand to stand in front of all the people?
3. In your opinion, what caused Jesus to become angry?
4. Do you think the man with the shriveled hand was told to be there by the Pharisees so that they could challenge Jesus?