



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

What Sort of God Is This?

Mark 2.1-17

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When Critics Come

Periodically, we should remind ourselves that Mark has one main theme in mind as he tells Jesus' story. He states it in his title: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God," (Mark 1.1 NIV). We also need to remember that not everyone has found that easy to believe, something that was as true when Jesus walked the earth as it is now. Mark knew that and, just after his initial summary of things Jesus typically did to show his authority in word and deed (1.21-45), he included five episodes that demonstrate the opposition Jesus faced (2.1-3.6).

That is not only honest, but serves as helpful reminder that people typically want to be shown reasons to believe. It also reminds us that we are not the first to be challenged by questions or disputes with our beliefs. Additionally, seeing the criticisms and how Jesus met them helps us to also see all what Mark intended when he used the title, "Son of God."

Two Related Stories

The forgiveness of a paralytic (2.1-12).

1. Verses 1-4 show the setting, beginning with another example of people crowding around to hear Jesus (cf. 1.32-37, 45). The paralytic's four friends take center stage; indeed, it is their faith that Jesus noticed (v. 5).
2. But, then we are surprised. Jesus doesn't act as he has in previous episodes (cf. 1.23-26, 30-31, 33-34, 39-42). We expect him to simply heal the man; instead he forgives him (2.5).
3. The pronouncement of forgiveness is the focal point of the passage's controversy (and the four friends disappear from the story). Some scribes, experts in the law, knew that Jesus had gone beyond what the law allowed at a fundamental point.
 - a. He must be blaspheming, they thought, dishonoring or lowering God by elevating himself; after all, only God could forgive sins (2.6-7).
 - b. It is important to notice that [1] the paralytic is brought to Jesus as someone he has never seen before, so there would be no offense against Jesus personally (as a man); and [2] that Jesus does not take issue with their understanding of things relative to

blasphemy. The point turns on his claim that he could forgive sins as God did, that this man, the “Son of Man” (see Hurtado's discussion¹), could forgive sins.

4. Verses 8-12 show that he had the right to forgive by again showing he had authority to heal.

Calling a tax collector and socializing with others like him (2.13-17).

1. As he walked along the sea (cf. 1.16), Jesus called Levi just as he had called Peter, Andrew, James, and John (2.13-14; cf. 1.16-20). But this call is different: Levi is a “tax collector” employed by “the Roman-installed-and-supported government of Herod Antipas” (Hurtado, 39).
 - a. Tax collectors were often accused of greed (they did win their job by bidding on how much they could raise and were paid based on how much they brought in over what the Romans were owed). “Among the zealous Jews who sought to throw off the Roman yoke, these tax collectors were hated as traitors” (Hurtado, 42).
 - b. It was this man who was being called into personal fellowship and service with the rabbi, Jesus. How could this be? Wouldn't a real Messiah know better?
2. Levi had friends—at work and socially—and Jesus and his disciples were “caught” dining with them (2.15-16). Hurtado explains the significance of this:

These “sinners” were people known for their failure to live by the religious law of Judaism, apparently in some major matters. We must understand that generally in the ancient Near Eastern lands sharing a meal was considered a significant and even an intimate social contact, establishing a bond among those who partook. Among ancient religious Jews, eating with a person implied religious acceptance of that person. There is every reason to believe that Jesus shared this view and that his eating with these “sinners” was intended to signify and to communicate acceptance of them and forgiveness of their sins (Hurtado, 39).²
3. “Jesus’ reply to the criticism of his action shows that his association with such sinners was a studied policy (v. 17)” (Hurtado, 39).

Presenting a Different View of God

First, these events point us to a view of God that goes beyond the “wow” factor. Yes, Jesus showed his power. But, that’s not the main point; in fact, in the first episode, it’s anticlimactic to the main point of forgiveness and the authority that gave him the right to forgive.

Second, these events show the forgiving nature of God.

1. We see that in the Old Testament, of course (cf. Ex. 34.6-7), but sometimes forget it when we read all the passages judging Israel for her spiritual adultery (cf. e.g., Isa. 1.10-17; Amos 5.21-26). We also often think of God in the Old Testament as being very distant.
2. But, in 2.1-12, God’s forgiveness is what Jesus emphasizes; in fact, he initiates it—in the conversation and in practice. And the point is that he is embodying who God is.
3. Forgiveness is also the main idea and issue in 2.13-17. A tax collector is also called to be Jesus’ close follower! He accepts all manner of “tax collectors and sinners”! Indeed, he shares table fellowship with them!

Third, the events show that Jesus has the right to choose whom he will forgive—and his welcome is wide indeed.

1. The Pharisees saw Jesus as someone claiming to be a holy man who nevertheless was foolishly inviting known sinners into his circle. How could he associate with them, especially in a custom that conferred acceptance on them? Should he not have denounced them and called for repentance and a study of the law?
2. Of course, Jesus was not going to leave people to their sins, but he did have a different understanding of the order of things. His

critics probably believed that observance to the religious law was a precondition for the arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus was convinced with prophet-like assurance that God's kingdom would come to a sinful Israel by God's free and gracious initiative and that he was the herald of its imminent arrival.... What better way, in Jesus' mind, to demonstrate that God's kingdom comes by divine grace and initiative and does not wait for a program of religious reform of Israel than by going to those well known as sinners and welcoming them to divine favor? (Hurtado, 39-40).

Merely Amazed—Or Believing?

No wonder the people “were all amazed and glorified God” (Mark 2.12). This was a picture of God most had never considered. Many still do not think of him this way. That points to something else we should notice. Mark often reports amazement among the people (e.g., 1.22, 27; 5.20) as a positive thing, but seldom as a sign of faith (see Hurtado, 38).

That challenges us. Are we merely amazed at Jesus, or really committed to him and to learning as much as we can about his deeds and character? Which are we seeking for those we meet: amazement or commitment? One way to gauge where we are regarding these questions is by how we react to his bold, grace-filled association with the likes of the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus welcomes all, and taught his followers to do the same. Let us be amazed—and then go and do likewise.

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Notes

¹ For a brief discussion of the title, “Son of Man,” see Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 37-38, 41-42.

² In an additional note on “sinners” Hurtado adds: “‘Sinners’ were people probably publicly known by their failure to observe religious practices and so, in the minds of the Pharisees (and general Jewish public as well), were perceived as irreligious and disgraceful. The Greek term here reflects the cause of their rejection by the religiously upstanding people. Their sins may have included not only a lack of observance of religious scruples but also such things as fraud or adultery, as is shown in the case of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), who was probably guilty of cheating, and that of the woman of Luke 7:36-50” (Hurtado, 43).