

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: TROUBLE BEGINS

MARK 1.40 - 2.12

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So far Mark has shown us Jesus' identity, mission and ministry. Now it's time for the trouble to start. Beginning with 1.40 and going through 3.6 Mark will now introduce us to the basic problems Jesus faced throughout his ministry: Popular misunderstanding and establishment opposition. The popular misunderstanding consists of the crowds thronging Jesus in hopes to see (and receive) more miracles, as well as their misguided hope that Jesus has come to cure their political ills; this popular enthusiasm actually functions to hinder Jesus' ministry instead of helping it, and this gives us plain insight into why Jesus tries to keep his role as Messiah quiet as long as possible. The establishment opposition consists in the growing conflict with the Jewish leadership, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, elders and scribes, over disagreements about Moses' Law and the Tradition of the Elders, as well as the Jews' offense at Jesus' claims to divine prerogative. The Tradition was a body of doctrine which had grown up around Moses' Law and which many of the Jewish leaders accorded equal or greater authority than Moses' Law. So now we see the beginning of Jesus' troubles in Misguided, Popular Enthusiasm and Establishment Opposition, presented to us in two stories of healing.

In the first story, Jesus is approached by a "leper." While this man may not have had the specific disease we know as leprosy (Hansen's disease), he was afflicted with some sort of deformative skin disease which forced him to live apart from the towns in isolation as a ceremonially unclean person. As long as he had the disease he was prevented from living a normal life, from entering the town, and from participation in the temple worship. He was also forbidden from approaching too closely to anyone, which prohibition he apparently ignored in order to approach Jesus. This approach is already an interesting element to begin the story, since it

would mean he not only disregarded the highly esteemed Tradition of the Elders, but even the very Law of Moses itself. It is likely Mark would have us see in this the typical expression of Synoptic (that is, pertaining to the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke) "faith," where some character goes to impressive lengths of humility, perseverance or determination to obtain help and healing from Jesus. So while on the one hand the leper displays questionable disregard for the Law, on the other hand we should probably be impressed with his faith in Jesus.

The leper's comment is probably a polite way of asking for healing, not so much expressing any doubt about Jesus' willingness. Jesus responds affirmatively by breaking the Law himself and touching the leper; this Moses forbade on the grounds that the person who touched the leper would himself become ceremonially unclean (and of course, likely contract the disease). However, the reader witnesses the remarkable reversal in seeing, not Jesus becoming unclean, but the leper being cleansed. The holiness of Jesus is more contagious and aggressive than the uncleanness of the man's leprosy, and so it is the leper, not Jesus, who contracts what the other possesses.

To this point in the narrative we have witnessed consistent disregard for Moses' Purity Laws by both parties involved. Our interest is greatly increased therefore to see Jesus command the former leper to go straight to the priest and perform the sacrifice pertaining to the cleansing of the leper. To say Jesus disregards Moses' Law is simply not the whole story; his relationship to Moses is more complex than that, including both elements of change and elements of continuity.

Now on the surface this is yet another miracle story which affirms Jesus' identity as supernatural Son of God and preacher of the present kingdom. At the same time this story points to the controversial issue of Jesus' relationship to Moses' Law which will soon come to the forefront. However, there seems to be a deeper thread running through this story pointing to a different purpose for its inclusion, especially as we consider its connection to the succeeding stories all the way

through 3.6. As positive as this cleansing of the leper may seem, its purpose is probably to express the trouble Jesus faced from the misguided, popular enthusiasm of the crowds. Here's why:

First, in v41, there is a variant reading which has Jesus angry, not compassionate toward the leper. While it is possible that "compassion" is the original reading, the difficulty of explaining how the "anger" reading could have arisen if it were not original has caused perhaps the majority of modern scholars to accept it as the original reading. If this is true, we must search the text itself to understand why Jesus would be angry with the leper. Since Jesus willingly cleansed him, and he healed other lepers on other occasions, it does not suffice to say Jesus is unwilling to help lepers, or that he was offended by the approach of someone ceremonially unclean. The best answer seems to be the conclusion of this story: Jesus commands the leper to silence about the healing but this command is disobeyed and the man spreads the news freely, with the result that Jesus is, for a time, no longer able to enter the towns without being thronged by crowds. When we consider the popular misunderstanding prevalent in Jesus' ministry, it is easy to see how this kind of fame was not at all what Jesus desired. So I suggest the best reason for Jesus' anger was his foresight (possibly supernatural) that the leper would spread the news and create more misguided popularity for Jesus.

If that were not enough, in v43 the word used for Jesus' "stern charge" to the leper is a surprisingly strong word, able to be used sometimes for barely controlled rage. Jesus practically gives the leper a scolding in advance as he commands the leper keep quiet about the healing; this is not a curt but friendly exchange, but a harsh demand for silence.

Also in v43, the word for Jesus "sending away" the leper is unusually strong; it is also used of Jesus throwing demons out of people. Imagine Jesus getting a firm grip on the man's shoulders and propelling him away! Jesus drove the leper away, if not

with violence, with noticeable sternness. This language draws our attention to Jesus' agitation in this event.

Then in v44, when Jesus commands the leper to offer the sacrifice, his phrase could be translated, "as a testimony against them." The same phrase is translated in similar negative ways elsewhere in this Gospel. While this would now move the issue from popular misunderstanding to establishment opposition, it nevertheless continues the negative tone of the story. So this would be Jesus saying, "Go and offer the sacrifice for the cleansing of a leper to prove to the priests that God's Son has come; if as things progress they come to oppose me, the very sacrifice they offered will serve as evidence against them before God."

Lastly, in v45, we see the negative result Jesus' was angry about: The leper broadcasts the healing and continues to increase Jesus' image as a miracle worker, which image Jesus doesn't want. Jesus' popularity hinders his ministry in that area for the time being, and this popularity clouds the true understanding of what Jesus is calling for; whenever the crowds hear of a miracle they come running. Whenever Jesus actually explains the nature of kingdom discipleship the crowds take off. They are coming for free lunch and entertainment; they aren't interested in suffering for the kingdom of heaven. So the overall effect of this story is to express the beginnings and increase of misguided, popular adulation of Jesus, and this is one half of the troubles which plagued Jesus during his ministry. In our next story Mark presents us with the other half.

In the second story Jesus returns to Capernaum after some time away, and news of his return gets out so that their house (presumably Peter's) is thronged by a crowd while Jesus preaches to them all. A group of men arrive carrying their paralytic friend on a stretcher-bed but they cannot access Jesus due to the crowd. The specifics of the man's condition are unknown to us except that he was unable to walk. It was common for homes of the time to have external stairs leading up to a flat roof, which was used for eating, prayer, drying clothes or passing time more

comfortably than in the climate of the home; the men access the roof and begin digging through it to get their friend to Jesus (their roofs were made of materials which could be easily dug through, such as mud and other removable materials); they lower the man into the room before Jesus.

Now Mark tells us Jesus saw their faith; this is at least the faith of the friends and perhaps also of the paralytic. Notice again the nature of Synoptic faith: persevering, determined effort to get to Jesus because of conviction that he can provide help and healing. And at this moment anyone watching would be prepared to watch yet another healing-miracle from the man famed for such things. They are disappointed. Jesus' response to their great faith is not to heal the man but to pronounce his sins forgiven.

Now among the crowd are some scribes, who are experts in the Law and in the Tradition. These men are like Bible teachers who know very well that no one has the authority to forgive sins save God alone. So they begin thinking to themselves that Jesus has just committed blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. Jesus, by supernatural insight, recognizes their thoughts and responds before they can say anything outwardly.

Jesus confronts them with an unexpected question: "Is it easier to say your sins are forgiven, or to say rise up and walk"? Upon first reflection it would seem the harder statement is "rise up and walk" since its effectiveness may be immediately verified. If Jesus claims the man's sins are forgiven no one knows whether it has really happened or not. But deeper reflection turns the question another way: Which of these things really is harder? Which is the more serious affliction, paralysis or sinful guiltiness? Remember that Jesus refuses to be pigeon-holed as merely a miracle-worker, and when they plop a paralytic in front of him, expecting and desiring nothing other than healing, Jesus ignores their desire and pronounces forgiveness instead. For this, this is what Jesus came to do: To deal with our sins and return us to a holy God that we may be included in his kingdom with all its

benefits, escaping final wrath and enjoying perfect health and wellness, not as a present experience, but as our final reward when the world is remade. It becomes clear that, by far, the harder, the more serious and relevant and important task is the forgiving of sins, not the healing of the body.

Now "your sins are forgiven" is the harder thing to say, and I suppose the reflective scribe would have known it. So Jesus might have left the issue there and done what he came from the Father to do. However, Jesus also proceeds to heal the man's body, not because it is his central purpose, but to support his central purpose in attesting his radical authority to even forgive sins. In this vein Jesus commands the paralytic to get up, carry his mat and go home, and the paralytic obeys. The crowd, of course, is amazed and they praise God for the amazing thing they witness.

Notice again that the issue of Jesus' authority comes to the forefront. His teaching is authoritative, he has authority over the demons, he has authority over Moses' purity Laws in healing the leper, and now Jesus claims (and shows) authority even to forgive sins. This fits nicely with Jesus' self-designation as "Son of Man," which is Jesus' favorite title for himself in the Synoptics. This title points back to the divine figure of Daniel 7 who approaches the Ancient of Days to receive an everlasting kingdom and authority over all the nations. We'll have more to say about this title later in the Gospel, but for now we'll mention that probably Jesus preferred it to the more widely used title Messiah in order to avoid the popular, political and military ideas associated with the latter. Son of Man was a title also pointing to the divine ruler of God's kingdom, but one which was less in use (if at all) in Jesus' time, and thus better for investing with the meaning which Jesus himself desired to communicate. But the point of this story is to continue Mark's expression of the beginning of trouble in Jesus' ministry, in this case the beginning of establishment opposition in the form of these scribes who question Jesus' authority to forgive sins.

Before closing, let's dwell on one application we can draw from these stories. It is obvious that Jesus faced serious misunderstanding from every quarter. The crowds saw him as a miracle-worker and political deliverer while the establishment increasingly saw him as a threat to their esteemed position and their interpretation of the Law. We need to be careful we do not also suffer from misunderstanding of the Person and Mission of Jesus.

What Mark has to tell us is that Jesus is the supernatural Son of God, come from heaven to open God's kingdom and call men to enter by faith and repentance. While Jesus performed many cures and exorcisms during his ministry these were not the substance of his ministry, but attestation; the substance of his ministry was not healing men's bodies by miracle but healing men's souls by preaching. Jesus came to deal with our sinful alienation from God; to make us repent and evoke our faith so that we would be returned to God. Every person Jesus healed, exorcised, or even resurrected went on to later suffer both illness and death; there isn't one exception. For Jesus to heal the body was only for him to provide temporary relief to people who would sometime later suffer again from physical ailments. But for Jesus to heal the soul as men heard his preaching and responded with repentance and faith was for Jesus to bring men into a whole new position from which they would never depart. The body may suffer and die from illness and injury; no matter, Jesus will resurrect the body at the end. But if the soul continues in its fallenness and evil without repentance there is nothing but the terror of hell and the finality of divine judgment to look forward to. Do we understand Jesus' purpose? He didn't come to give us a good life, but eternal life. He didn't come to comfort us in our sin but to make us so uncomfortable we finally leave our sin. He came to bring our present lives to an end even before we die, so that we could obtain the future life. Jesus cannot be reduced to one more self-help guru offering his own unique way to have a fulfilled life, since he came not to fill our present lives but to empty them. He came to take our lives, to kill us as we are united with him in crucifixion and burial, that we might come to be raised with him in his

resurrection and ascension. He came to make us lose this world so that we could become heirs of the next. This truth the crowds and establishment were not ready for. Let's be careful to get clear on it for ourselves.