

## Called to Be Apostles!

(The Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 3)

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We're back to our study of the Gospel of Mark, now in chapter 3. As before, we'll discuss each section, and then offer some questions to think about.

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

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

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus (3:1-6).

Jesus is accused of breaking the Sabbath. We've seen this issue come up before in Mark's account, when his disciples were plucking ears of grain on the sabbath. Here, Jesus heals a man on the sabbath, and once again the "usual suspects" — the Pharisees — are monitoring his activities to see if he will violate the Law of Moses.

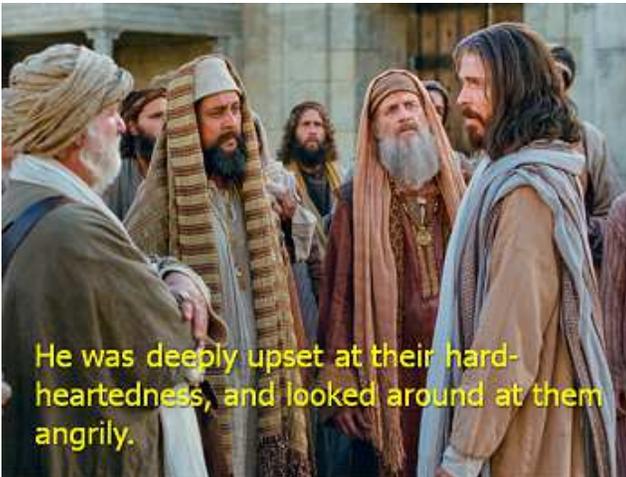
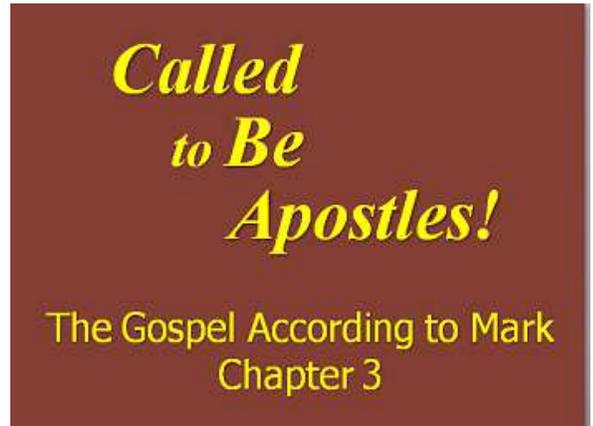
The Law said the seventh day was a day of rest, when no "work" could be done. That's a really good idea, because people shouldn't have to work 24/7. Unhappily, in our economy today many people are expected to work on the Lord's Day, and some people *choose* to work every day because of the extra pay. But the Bible says we're not to be slaves to work, we're to have at least one day to just be human beings and not cogs in the economic machine. So keeping the sabbath is a really good idea. Unfortunately, the Pharisees carried it to such an extreme that even doing good things, like healing a sick or disabled person, were considered "work" and forbidden on the sabbath.

Why was the sabbath so important to the Pharisees? Recall that the Jews at this time were under foreign domination, which they deeply resented. The Pharisees believed that if every Jew faithfully observed the Law of Moses, the Messiah would appear to rescue them and restore their independence. Observing the sabbath was one of the things that marked off the Jews as a special people of God. In fact, it's been said that it wasn't the

Jews who kept the sabbath, but the sabbath that kept the Jews. For the Pharisees, the promoters and teachers of the Torah, to question the centrality of the weekly day of rest was to question the integrity of Jewish faith.

But Jesus sees things differently. The kingdom of God is arriving, and healing the sick is one of the signs of the Lord's return to his people. Therefore it's appropriate to do good on the sabbath, to do things that benefit people in need. It deeply grieved and angered Jesus that the religious leaders of his people should be so callous in the face of human suffering — for people made in the image of God should be set free from their afflictions.

The Pharisees have another take on this issue, so Jesus is a terrible threat to their program of getting all Jews to obey the Torah so they can throw the Romans off their backs. Jesus must be destroyed. Enmity



He was deeply upset at their hard-heartedness, and looked around at them angrily.

makes strange bedfellows. There was no love lost between the Pharisees and the Herodians, the local rulers who governed as clients of Rome. Unlike the Pharisees, the Herodians didn't have an overwhelming interest in keeping all the traditional rules of Judaism that had been building up over the last century or so. But the Roman occupiers and their puppet rulers had the power of life and death over anyone who threatened the public peace, and if the Pharisees could pin something on Jesus they could get rid of him.

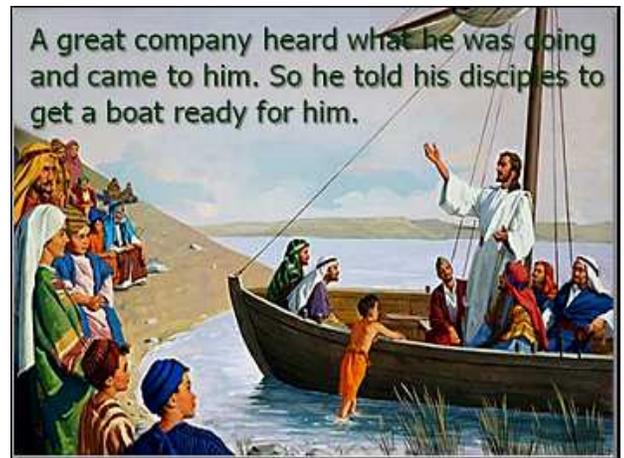
Let's ask ourselves this, as we did last week: In what ways can I use the Lord's Day not only to worship the Lord, but also to bless other people and do good?

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon.

Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was (3:7-12).

So many people were looking for Jesus and coming to him, because the reality of God was evident in what he was doing — healing the sick, delivering people from demons, and proclaiming a compelling message about the coming of the kingdom of God. What a contrast with the situation today in the Western world of Europe and North America, where relatively few people are looking for Jesus! Africa has seen huge gatherings of people coming to Jesus, Latin America has witnessed a remarkable expansion of Bible-believing churches, and the faith is growing so rapidly in China that before long that Communist nation will have more Christians than any other country in the world, if it doesn't already. But that kind of enthusiasm for Jesus isn't happening here — why not?

There are probably a number of factors. One factor is the prevailing philosophy in the Western world, sometimes called scientific materialism. A shallow perception of reality leads to the idea that the material universe is all there is, so "spiritual" considerations such as the existence of God are irrelevant. Even some scientists is now beginning to question that idea, due to new findings in fields such as quantum physics and molecular biology where the old, purely mechanistic, explanations no longer work. However, the scientific establishment has become a kind of high priesthood that excommunicates anyone who doesn't accept their party line of scientific materialism. Nevertheless, I believe truth will eventually prevail and we can expect to see a shift away from the purely material understanding of the universe.

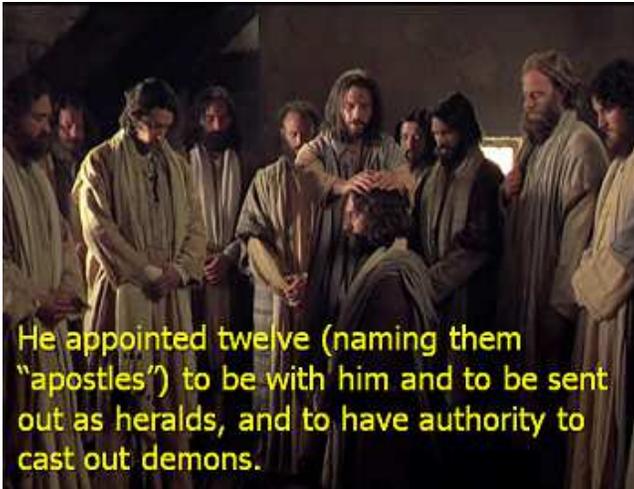


But I believe the most important reason why people aren't flocking to Jesus, as they were in this passage from Mark, is that *Jesus isn't there* for them to come to. You and I know Jesus is always here, in his presence by the Holy Spirit, but sadly the *evidence* of his presence is often missing from our church life. Where there *is* the evidence of Jesus, and the kingdom of God he brings, people are more likely to respond to the call of the gospel. Miracles, healing, "signs and wonders" — and above all, the faith-filled and generous lives of those who call themselves Christians — are the evidences to which people might respond. So our next question is this: **Am I living out my faith, and is our church demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit, in such a way that people can see that Jesus is present, and respond to him?**

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve--designating them apostles--that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him (3:13-19).

Jesus' gospel of the emerging kingdom of God needs to be spread far and wide through Israel, the people through whom the Lord has always planned to renew his damaged creation. So Jesus appoints twelve "heralds," or apostles — a word that means people who are sent with a message — to help him get the word out. Notice that these men aren't just heralds, or announcers, of the kingdom; they're also called to take authority over the demonic powers of evil. In the New Testament, Jesus isn't the only one who heals people and delivers them; his followers have the same authority. According to John's Gospel, Jesus told his followers they would do even greater things than he had done (John 14:12).



He appointed twelve (naming them "apostles") to be with him and to be sent out as heralds, and to have authority to cast out demons.

Why does Jesus choose *twelve* men? If you look at the different names of the disciples, or apostles, in the Gospels you'll find more than twelve men listed, so perhaps the circle of twelve changed from time to time. And, by the way, some women are also listed among those who were following Jesus as he went about proclaiming the gospel. In any case, at one point Jesus sent out seventy people with the same apostolic mission, to preach the kingdom of God and deliver people from demonic powers (Luke 10:1).

But the number twelve was important. In Abraham, the Lord had chosen Israel to take his blessing to the world. Israel became a people of twelve tribes, like Judah and Benjamin and Ephraim and Dan. But the Israelites couldn't handle that calling. In choosing twelve disciples, Jesus is rebuilding Israel as the people through whom God will

redeem his world. We can't ever forget how the New Testament gospel emerges from what God has already been doing throughout the story of the Old Testament.

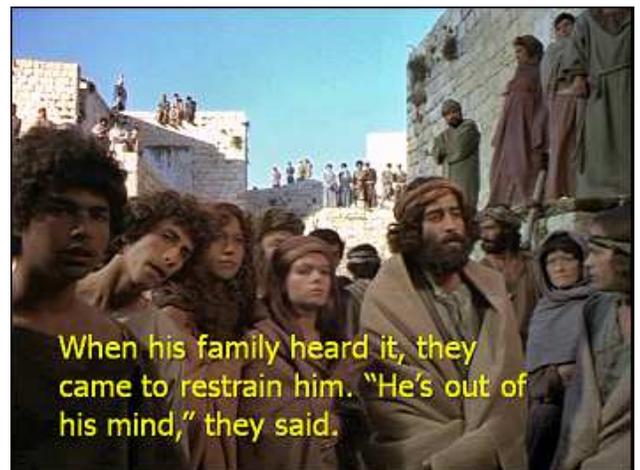
From New Testament teaching we understand that *apostleship is for all believers*, not just an elite core of special leaders. Anyone who is close to Jesus is an apostle, a herald — a person sent out with the message of the living presence of the Lord. Since Jesus is in the business of rebuilding God's special people, anyone close to Jesus belongs to what the apostle Paul calls "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). Mark's account of the calling of the twelve includes you and me, as well. So let's ask: **How effective am I as one of Jesus' apostles? Am I exercising the authority Jesus has given me over evil in this world, and making it clear through my words and deeds that God is on the move today?**

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul ! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.

I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit" (3:20-30).

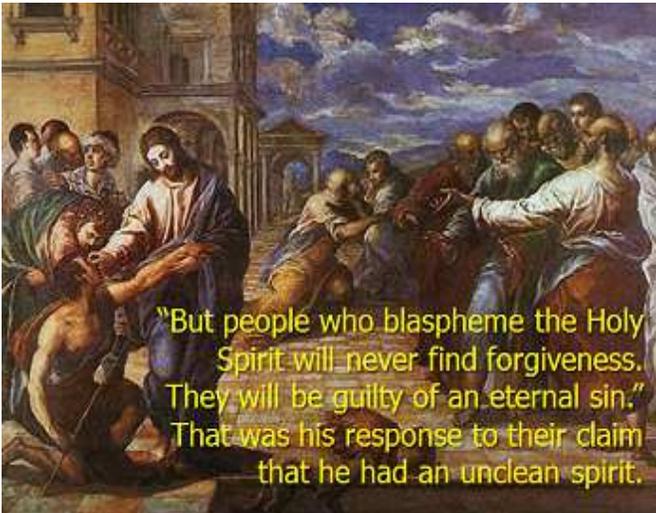
Sometimes our picture of Jesus is so exalted and other-worldly that we forget he had a real-life family back in Nazareth. A few chapters further on, Mark will even give us the names of Jesus' four brothers, and he also had sisters. Two of Jesus' brothers, James and Judah (or Jude), wrote epistles in our New Testament. But at this stage his family hasn't yet "caught on" to what God is doing through their brother; it will take his resurrection from the dead to clue them in. James became the leader of the Jerusalem



When his family heard it, they came to restrain him. "He's out of his mind," they said.

congregation, and after he was executed a second cousin of Jesus, named Simeon, became head of the Jerusalem church. Two of Jesus' grand-nephews were hailed before the Roman emperor Domitian, who suspected they had ambitions as rival rulers of the House of David; they were simple farmers with about 80 acres between them and Caesar let them go, but they were later martyred for their faith. The New Testament doesn't tell us about these other family members of Jesus, but we know about them from other records.

Jesus' family eventually became leaders of the Jewish branch of the church, but here in Mark's account they still think he's crazy to be doing what he's doing — going about preaching the kingdom of God and challenging the evil spirits. Many committed Christians have experienced a situation where a family member found their belief in Jesus hard to understand. I know that my late brother and his wife — especially my sister-in-law — didn't think much of my belief in the truth of Scripture and my loyalty to Jesus as the risen Lord. In fact, my sister-in-law is sure that Jesus is dead! When family members don't share our faith, sometimes things can get a little testy. So we might be asking ourselves: **How can I maintain a strong faith when close family members don't share it, oppose it, or even make fun of me because of it?**



"But people who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will never find forgiveness. They will be guilty of an eternal sin." That was his response to their claim that he had an unclean spirit.

According to Mark, it was while Jesus was casting out demons that his family came, thinking he was out of his mind. Some other people, religious authorities from Jerusalem, went even further; they claimed Jesus could cast out demons because he was himself possessed by the prince of demons, called Beelzebul — another name for the satan or accuser. Jesus had a logical answer: Your argument is ridiculous, because if the Accuser is casting out the Accuser, isn't he just defeating himself? Whether those people really believed what they accused Jesus of, or whether they just made that up to make trouble for him, is debatable. What Jesus was doing, and the authority from God he displayed, threatened their position as the experts to whom the people were supposed to look for answers about how to live for God. We've already seen that they were plotting to do away with Jesus.

After answering his opponents' objection to his delivering people from demons, Jesus goes on to make another statement that many Christians have puzzled over. He says that people who deny the work of the Holy Spirit are committing a sin that can't ever be forgiven. Believers have often debated which sin is the "unforgivable sin." In some Christian circles, for example, it seems that divorce is considered the unforgivable sin; for them, it disqualifies a person from serving in a leadership position in the church, and taints their testimony. For some reason, divorce is viewed as a more serious disqualifier than murder, because both King David and the apostle Paul were guilty of that, and both are considered great leaders of the faith.

Obviously, that's not what Jesus is talking about here. The "unforgivable sin" is to deny the work of the Holy Spirit, because it's through the Spirit that people are led to seek and receive forgiveness of sin. If you question the Spirit, then you've cut yourself and others off from the means of God's forgiveness. So in the case of divorce, for example, it's not the person who went through a divorce who's committed the "unforgivable sin." It's the person who *claims they can't be forgiven* who is committing the "unforgivable sin" by denying the work of the Holy Spirit, and the power of God to give people another chance to live for Jesus. Our Father is always in the business of making things new and giving people another opportunity to serve him, because it's his purpose to renew his creation. Through Jesus there's always the possibility of a fresh start.

Again, Jesus underscores how central forgiveness is, in his gospel of the kingdom of God. Our question: Am I always open to the forgiving and cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, both in my life and the lives of others?

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (3:31-35).

Jesus' family from Nazareth is still hanging around, wanting to talk some sense into him, to get him to come home and forget this crazy mission that's getting him in trouble with the authorities. Devotion to family is an important Christian value, but if a person's family gets in the way of his or her devotion to the Lord, then that person has to make a hard decision. It's especially hard for a Muslim, for example, because often if a Muslim becomes a believer in Jesus the family will disown them, or even try to put them to death. Here, I think Jesus is making the point that being part of the new move of God is more important than pleasing other family members that don't quite go along with it.

We can recall some other things Jesus said about family ties that sound harsh to us today. Take, for example, what Jesus says to his mother at the wedding in Cana of Galilee: "Woman, what have you to do with me?" (John 2:4). Not a very nice way to speak to your mother! And remember what he says in Matthew 10:37: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

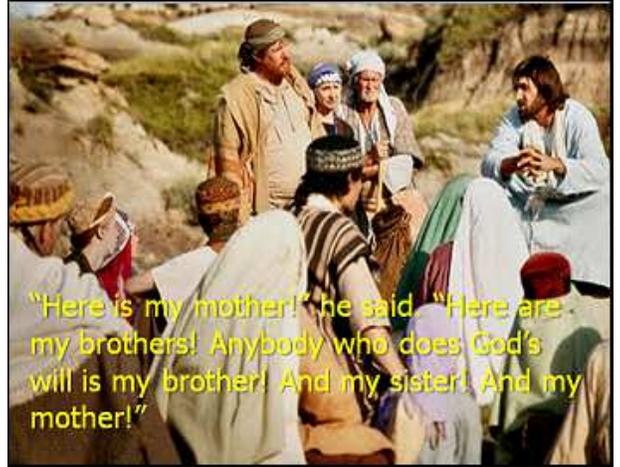
If these saying sound cruel and uncaring, we need to place them in context. It's not that family ties are bad in themselves, and Jesus elsewhere criticizes the Pharisees because they used a quirk in the Law to deprive their parents of financial support, thus violating the commandment to honor one's father and mother.

But when it comes to family ties, the really important thing is that God is *building a new family*, and calling people into *that* family. In the coming of Jesus the Lord has returned to his people, making available his forgiveness of their sin, and creating a new community that's intended to live out God's will and demonstrate his new creation at work. For Jesus, that's the family tie that's really important. So he tells his followers, "Anybody who does God's will is my brother! And my sister! And my mother!"

So here's a question for you and me who find ourselves in a Bible-believing church: **How can we, as members of the family of God, show the same kind of care and concern and loyalty for people in our church family that we would show for members of our natural family? Is it possible, and if not, why not?**

Finally, today, let's review the questions raised in our study of Mark, chapter 3:

- How can I use the Lord's Day to bless other people and do good?
- Do my life, and our church's life, demonstrate the power of the Spirit so others can respond to Jesus?
- Am I exercising the authority Jesus has given me over evil, so that people can see God at work today?
- Can I maintain my faith when close family members don't share it?
- Am I open to the forgiving power of the Holy Spirit, in my life and the lives of others?
- As a church, how can we show that we belong to the new family God is creating?



"Here is my mother!" he said. "Here are my brothers! Anybody who does God's will is my brother! And my sister! And my mother!"