

"I Know Who You Are"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a three-part series

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Mark 1:21-34 (NIV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"

²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him."

²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they immediately told Jesus about her. ³¹ So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

³² That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Jesus on Twitter? Would you be one of his followers?

One of the twitter phenomena is thousands of people tweeting the same live event. Thousands of people sharing their impressions and experiences 140 characters at a time. You'd like to think that if you could somehow combine all those differing reports of the same event, you could get an objective just-the-facts analysis. But that wouldn't be the case at all, for each person there would be painting a different portrait of the event, focusing on different moments, observing different people.

The four gospels are a bit like that. Each gospel writer paints a different portrait of Jesus. Four portraits, yes, but of only one Jesus. Though the synoptic¹ gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) share material and order events similarly, each writer gives you his own take on the story of Jesus.

And within each gospel, you get lots of people and events swirling around Jesus. Each person seems to know something of Jesus, but their understanding of Jesus varies dramatically. Some often seem blind to his true identity and vocation. Others get it right off. In today's story, we meet a few persons who know quite well the truth about Jesus.

Plunging right in

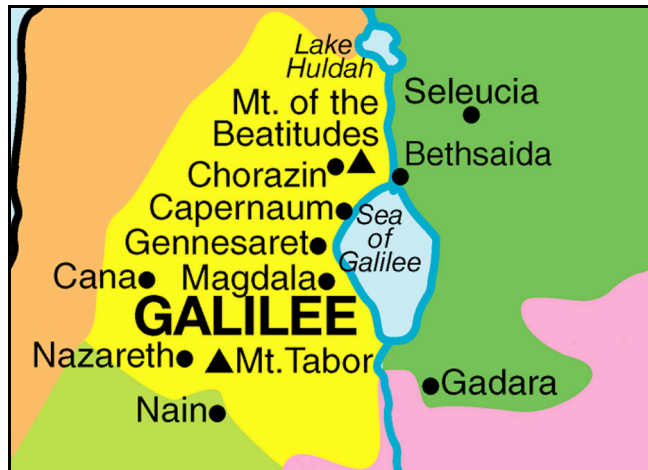
After John the Baptizer's imprisonment, Jesus launched his public ministry in Galilee, a region about 50-75 miles north of Jerusalem and Jesus' home. Galilee was Jewish, with a reputation for rebellion and trouble.² Jesus' announcement was simple and to the

¹ "Synoptic" means to read things side-by-side. It is used to refer to Matthew, Mark, and Luke because of their similarities. Matthew and Luke seem to have had access to Mark and some other common material as well. John's gospel is very different from the synoptics. The only miracle story that is in all four gospels is the feeding of the multitude.

² When Jesus was about ten, there was a tax revolt in Galilee, centered in the large city of Sepphoris, about 3-4 miles from Nazareth. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, reported that several thousand Jews were crucified on the roads of Galilee to end the rebellion. Much of Sepphoris was burned and had to be rebuilt. The many rebuilding projects were likely places of employment for Joseph and his family, including Jesus.

point: “The time has come. The kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Jesus began to gather followers, disciples really. Simon and Andrew, brothers, heeded Jesus’ call. They left their fishing trade in the Sea of Galilee (see the map below) and followed Jesus, as did James and John, the sons of Zebedee. All five went into the village of Capernaum³ on the northwestern shore.



When Saturday came, the day of the Jewish Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue in Capernaum and began to teach. What astonished and amazed the villagers wasn’t so much what Jesus taught that day, but how. He taught with an authority suitable for the Lawgiver not the teacher. It must have been very disconcerting, for the lawgiver of Israel had always been the LORD God Almighty.

While Jesus was teaching, a man burst into the room. He was known to the community and was believed to be possessed by an evil or impure spirit, a demon of some sort. When the man cried out, it was the demon who spoke to Jesus:

What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

Talk about astonishing. Much of Mark’s gospel will focus on the blindness of the disciples closest to Jesus, on their inability or unwillingness to grasp the fullness of Jesus’ identity and vocation. But, here, right out of the gate, the demons know exactly who Jesus is and they fear him. They know what his vocation means for them. They know the full extent of his authority.

Thus, when Jesus orders them to go, they go. That simple. Jesus is Lord and the demons know it. He must be obeyed. First though, Jesus literally “muzzles” the demon, who will not be allowed to speak. Now and again later in the day, Jesus orders the demons to remain silent. Presumably Jesus isn’t ready for everyone to hear what the demons have to say about Jesus’ identity.

The onlookers can’t stop talking amongst themselves; who could blame them. They had never heard or seen anyone like this. Jesus spoke to them with what seemed to be the authority of God himself. And then even the demons had obeyed him. How could anyone make sense of this? Who could be prepared for what they had just witnessed?

Jesus doesn’t ask anyone if they understand what they are hearing and seeing, he simply charges out of the synagogue and heads for the home of Simon and Andrew. There, the men’s mother-in-law is very ill with a serious fever. When they arrive, Jesus takes the woman’s hand in his own and she is healed of the fever. Not too surprisingly I suppose, when she stands up, she immediately begins to take care of everyone else.

³ Capernaum was a village of 800 residents or so, dependent on the fishing trade in the Sea of Galilee. It was Peter’s home, though not his birthplace, and served as a headquarters of sort for Jesus and his disciples. Most of the action in the first half of Mark’s gospel takes place around the Sea of Galilee.

That same evening, still on the Saturday, people started bringing to Jesus all those who needed healing – the ill, the injured, the demon-possessed. All the broken loved ones were brought to Jesus . . . and he healed them, he healed them all. He cured the sick. He drove out the demons, all of whom, Mark tells us, knew fully the identity of Jesus.

N. T. Wright writes:

Here is a man, not one of the recognized teachers, who begins on his own authority to tell people what God’s will is, how the kingdom is coming. The usual teachers—priests and scribes, the literate ones, with in some places Pharisees as well, the self-appointed scrupulous guardians of Jewish ancestral traditions—didn’t teach like that. They always said ‘as Moses said’, or ‘as Rabbi so-and-so said’. Jesus spoke with a quiet but compelling authority all of his own.

And with the same authority he spoke words of healing. Sometimes people for whom life had become a total nightmare—whose personalities seemed taken over by alien powers—confronted Jesus; indeed, they seem to have had a kind of inside track on recognizing him, knowing who he was and what he’d come to do. He’d come to stop the nightmare, to rescue people, both nations and individuals, from the destructive forces that enslaved them. So whether it was shrieking demons, a woman with a fever, or simply whatever diseases people happened to suffer from, Jesus dealt with them, all with the same gentle but deeply effective authority.⁴

Scribes

When Jesus begins to teach with authority, it is the scribes of Israel that he is compared to. The scribes are the “teachers of the law.” Here is some information on the scribes from the Anchor Bible Dictionary.

“The scribes presented in the Synoptic Gospels are best understood as bureaucrats and experts on Jewish life. They could have been low-level officials and judges both in Jerusalem and in the towns and villages of the country. Mark, possibly the most reliable of the gospels, which may reflect conditions in Palestine just before or after the war and which most probably has traditions from the middle of the 1st century, places scribes mainly in or from Jerusalem and only twice simply in Galilee (2:6; 9:14). The presence of scribes in Jerusalem as officials and in Galilean villages as copyists and low-level officials is very probable. The gospels testify most reliably to scribes connected to the government in Jerusalem, and their role there seems to be as associates of the priests, both in judicial proceeding and enforcement of Jewish custom and law, and ongoing business in the Sanhedrin. It is likely that the scribes did not constitute a unified social organization or class, as the NT claims, but rather fulfilled a number of roles in different parts of society. The gospel traditions about scribes may reflect the opposition of many scattered local officials to early Christian communities before and after the war and perhaps opposition to Jesus also.¹”

¹ Saldarini, A. J. (1992). Scribes. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.), . *Vol. 5: The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (D. N. Freedman, Ed.) (1015). New York: Doubleday.

Knowing Jesus

The demon knows what no one else at this point in Mark’s story knows: Jesus is the “Holy One of God,” at a minimum one set aside for the special work of God. And it seems that Jesus isn’t ready for everyone to hear what the demons have to say. It is almost as if the people have to be prepared for the hearing of the truth. Perhaps that is true of us as well. God tends us and cultivates us, preparing us to hear the truth, shaping our vision so that we can see the truth of his son, the Christ, the Holy One of God.

Mark began his gospel by telling us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. But the crowds and even his disciples don’t know it yet. So what do we make of Mark’s revelation that it those who oppose Jesus that first know his true identity? If the demons know it, why doesn’t everyone?

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *Mark for Everyone* (11–12). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Mark's Story of Jesus

Mark's gospel was probably the first gospel to be written, perhaps as early as 60AD (30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection). The early church held that the Gospel was written by Mark, an associate of the apostle Peter. Thus, it has often been seen as Peter's story of Jesus. This makes it all the more fascinating that Peter does not play as prominent role in Mark as in the other Gospels and is principally portrayed as the lead sinner. Indeed, the blindness of all the disciples is one of Mark's key themes.

The Gospel is very brief, action-oriented, and compellingly dramatic. It is certainly nothing like a modern biography. There is nothing about Jesus' birth or childhood. We aren't even told what Jesus looked like. Instead, in sixteen chapters, Mark proclaims the Good News. The adult Jesus bursts onto the scene at the beginning of the Gospel. Half of the Gospel is devoted to Jesus' ministry and half is focused on the last week of Jesus' life.

In all likelihood, the original ending of Mark has been lost. (Certainly, the "longer" ending in your Bible is not part of Mark's Gospel. God doesn't call us to handle poisonous snakes.)

Mark integrates two portraits of Jesus in the Gospel. First, Jesus is a powerful wonder worker and authoritative teacher. But Jesus is also a rejected Messiah, a suffering servant. How could this be? Why would God's Messiah suffer such a horrible death? The disciples aren't able to make any sense of this. It will be hard for us too.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We have four gospels. Presumably, God thinks we benefit from having all four. Each gives us a different portrait of Jesus, emphasizing varying aspects of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection.
 - a. How could having four gospels help us to grasp the truth about Jesus? Wouldn't it be easier if we just had one single authoritative gospel?
 - b. Why do you think Mark would want to tell his story using action, without any of the long blocks of Jesus' teaching like we find in Matthew?
 - c. What is gained by Mark's short length?
2. The demons know who Jesus is, but not his own disciples! Set aside your thoughts about whether there really are such beings as demons, and consider what Mark is telling us about Jesus.
 - a. Why do you think it is that Jesus is known by these spiritual beings?
 - b. What do we as Mark's readers gain from the story of this exorcism?
 - c. It is still very early in Mark's story, but why do you think the Jesus' closest disciples remain so clueless?
3. Every person in this week's story has an advantage over us when it comes to knowing Jesus – they could listen to him, talk to him, walk with him. But we have an advantage them; we have the benefit of the New Testament's witness to Jesus.
 - a. How can we come to know Jesus better?
 - b. How do the gospels help us in this? How about Paul's letters or Peter's?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

These readings are the beginnings of Jesus' public ministry in the other three gospels.

<p>Monday, Matthew 3 John the Baptist prepares the way and baptizes Jesus.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 4 Jesus is tested in the wilderness, calls his first disciples, and begins preaching and healing.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 3 Luke's telling of John the Baptist and Jesus' genealogy. Notice that this genealogy goes all the way back to Adam. Why? What's the point?</p>	<p>Thursday, Luke 4 Jesus is tested in the wilderness and rejected in Nazareth. Nonetheless, he drives out demons and heals many.</p>
<p>Friday, John 1:19-51 John the Baptist announces Jesus, who begins to gather around himself some disciples.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

