

# Session 3

## Five Controversies

*Mark 2:1-3:6 | A Ransom for Many: A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Mark*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** Participants discover that Mark has arranged five conflict stories into a deliberate arc, from silent objections in the heart to an open plot to destroy Jesus, and that at the center of the storm stands one staggering claim: the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. They will trace that authority from the paralytic's roof to the upper room of John 20, and into the confessional.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The forgiveness of sins and the Sacrament of Penance. Only God can forgive sins, and God, in Christ, has willed that this forgiveness reach us through human ministry: "he gave such authority to men" (Matthew 9:8; CCC 1441-1445).

#### What You Need to Know

Mark 2:1-3:6 is a tightly built unit of five controversies: the paralytic and the forgiveness of sins (2:1-12), eating with tax collectors and sinners (2:13-17), the question about fasting (2:18-22), plucking grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28), and the withered hand on the Sabbath (3:1-6). The arrangement is deliberate: the first and last both involve a healing and a charge; the opposition escalates from "questioning in their hearts" (2:6) to public interrogation to watching him "so that they might accuse him" (3:2), and it ends with Pharisees and Herodians, groups with no natural sympathy for each other, uniting on "how to destroy him" (3:6). Mark puts the shadow of the cross over the story by chapter three. The verdict that kills Jesus is not a late misunderstanding; it is the world's early answer to his claims.

The center of gravity is 2:5-12. Jesus says "My son, your sins are forgiven," and the scribes reason: "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Notice: their theology is correct. Sin, whatever else it wounds, is finally an offense against God (Psalm 51:4), so the forgiving of sins as such is God's prerogative. Jesus does not correct their premise. He accepts it and then demonstrates that he holds the prerogative, attaching the forgiveness to a visible, checkable healing "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The phrase "on earth" matters enormously and will anchor the steelman.

"Son of Man" enters the Gospel here (2:10, 2:28). To casual ears it sounds humble, and it can mean simply "a human being." But its home address is Daniel 7:13-14: "one like a son of man" who comes with the clouds of heaven and receives from the Ancient of Days everlasting dominion, glory, and kingdom. It is Jesus' favorite self-title precisely because it is veiled: humble on the surface, cosmic underneath, and it lets him define his messiahship on his own terms. It fits the Secret perfectly.

The bridegroom saying (2:19-20) carries two quiet bombs. First, in the prophets, the Bridegroom of Israel is the LORD himself (Hosea 2:19-20; Isaiah 62:5); Jesus calmly steps into that role. Second, "the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast": "taken away" is often heard as the Gospel's first whispered hint of the Passion, and it is also the charter of Christian fasting. We keep Fridays penitential and observe the Lenten fast not because the Bridegroom never came, but because we live between his being taken and his return.

## Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Daniel 7:13-14.** The son of man who receives everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days. Read alongside Mark 2:10, it turns "the Son of Man has authority" from a modest idiom into an enthronement claim.
- **Psalms 51:4.** "Against you, you only, have I sinned." David, having wronged Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, still says the sin is finally against God. This is why the scribes' premise, only God can forgive sins, is sound, and why Jesus' claim is either blasphemy or divinity.
- **Hosea 2:19-20 and Isaiah 62:5.** The LORD betrothes Israel to himself forever; the Bridegroom of the covenant is God. Jesus' self-designation as bridegroom quietly claims the divine role, and the Church will unfold it: Christ the Bridegroom, the Church his Bride (CCC 796).
- **1 Samuel 21:1-6.** David, the anointed king not yet enthroned, flees from the murderous reigning power and receives the holy bread of the Presence for himself and his companions. Jesus' use of the story is precise typology: the true Anointed One, not yet enthroned, hunted by the authorities, whose companions' needs outrank ritual regulation. And the detail that the greater David's story also runs through holy bread is one to keep silently in mind; this Gospel will return to bread.
- **Genesis 2:2-3 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.** The Sabbath's double root: God's rest crowning creation, and Israel's liberation from slavery. "The Sabbath was made for man" (2:27) restores the gift to its purpose: a day for man's good, worship, rest, mercy, not a cage. The Church's Sunday flows from this logic, transfigured by the Resurrection (CCC 2173).

## Voices of the Church

### Voices of the Church: St. Ambrose of Milan (On Penance)

Writing against the Novatianists, who admitted that God forgives but denied that the Church could absolve grave sinners, St. Ambrose argues that Christ truly conferred this ministry on his Church: those who deny the Church's power to forgive sins would have to deny Baptism itself, for there too sins are remitted through human ministers. The Lord's gifts are not diminished by passing through the hands he chose; it is one and the same Christ who forgives in both fonts of mercy.

### Voices of the Church: St. John Chrysostom (On the Priesthood, Book 3)

St. John Chrysostom stands in awe of the ministry of absolution: God has given to priests, he says, a power he gave neither to angels nor to archangels, for to no angel was it said, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." What priests perform on earth, God ratifies above. Chrysostom's point is not clerical pride but the opposite: trembling humility that God should work heaven's business through earthen vessels.

### Voices of the Church: St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Magnesians)

Within living memory of the apostles, St. Ignatius describes believers who had lived in the old order as now "no longer keeping the Sabbath, but living in accordance with the Lord's day, on which our life also rose through him." The earliest Church did not experience Sunday as a betrayal of the Sabbath but as its flowering: in Christ, the Lord's Day fulfills and transfigures the Sabbath's

spiritual truth (CCC 2175).

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1441-1445:** Only God forgives sins; because Jesus is the Son of God he says "your sins are forgiven"; and by his own authority he gives this power to men to be exercised in his name.
- **CCC 574:** From the beginning of his public ministry, Pharisees and supporters of Herod together with priests and scribes agreed to destroy him.
- **CCC 796:** The nuptial imagery: Christ the Bridegroom, the Church his Bride, prepared for the wedding feast.
- **CCC 2173:** Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath, gives the law of rest its authentic meaning: doing good, saving life, mercy.
- **CCC 1503:** Christ the physician of souls and bodies, who came to call sinners.

## Thread Watch

### Thread Watch (leader only)

**The Messianic Secret:** DEVELOPING with a twist: here Jesus goes public, deliberately, about his authority ("that you may know," 2:10). The Secret is not about hiding his power; it is about controlling how his identity is understood. Authority to forgive he demonstrates; the title Son of God he keeps veiled under "Son of Man." Watch the group wrestle with the difference.

**The Cross:** The shadow arrives at 3:6 ("how to destroy him") and in the bridegroom's being "taken away" (2:20). Name neither as a thread; just make sure both verses get read aloud and felt.

**The Bread:** Still officially unplanted, but note privately: the David typology of 2:25-26 runs through holy bread given to the anointed one's companions. When the thread plants in Session 6 and resolves at the Last Supper, this scene will retroactively glow. Say nothing now.

**Torn / The Way:** Dormant this session.

## Session Goals

1. Participants can trace the five-controversy arc and its escalation to 3:6.
2. Participants discover Daniel 7 and can explain why "Son of Man" is a veiled enthronement title.
3. Participants can make the full argument from Mark 2, Matthew 9:8, and John 20:21-23 for the Church's ministry of absolution, having first stated the Protestant objection at full strength.
4. Participants can explain Christian fasting and Sunday from the bridegroom saying and the Sabbath controversies.
5. At least a soft commitment: participants consider going to Confession before the study ends.

## Time Note (90 Minutes)

Win 15 min | Build 55 min | Send 15 min | Closing prayer 5 min. **Pre-chosen cuts if running long:** compress question 6 (fasting/bridegroom) into a leader summary and drop the second Dig Deeper (Abiathar note) unless someone raises it. Do not cut the paralytic sequence or the steelman chain; they are the session.



## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Man, you have authority on earth to forgive sins. Give us tonight the honesty of the four friends who tore open a roof, the joy of Levi who threw a party, and the humility to bring you the one thing you ask for: our sins. Amen.

### Win (15 minutes)

1. Who is the most persistent person you know? Tell us about a time their refusal to give up changed an outcome.
2. Have you ever been given news so good you were almost afraid to believe it was allowed? What was that like?

*Leader bridge:* Tonight, five arguments in a row, and they escalate fast. By the end of the passage, people are planning a murder. Watch what claim of Jesus sets it all off.

### Build (55 minutes)

**Read Mark 2:1-3:6 aloud, once through.** Then work through the questions.

1. **The paralytic (2:1-12). Four friends dig through a roof, and Mark says: "When Jesus saw THEIR faith, he said to the paralytic, My son, your sins are forgiven." Two surprises in one verse: whose faith moves Jesus, and what gift does he give first? What is Mark teaching in each?**

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

First surprise: *their* faith, which surely includes the four bearers and may well include the man himself, occasions grace for the man on the mat. Faith is personal but not private; we really can carry one another to Christ, which is the logic of all intercession, of infant Baptism, of praying for the dead, of the communion of saints. Ask the group: who carried you to Jesus, and whose mat are you holding a corner of right now? Second surprise: the man came for legs and was given absolution first. Jesus reads the deeper paralysis. Forgiveness is not the consolation prize; it is the primary healing, and the walking is the visible proof of the invisible gift.

2. **The scribes reason: "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" DISCOVERY: someone look up Psalm 51:4, David's confession after Bathsheba and Uriah. Is the scribes' theology wrong?**

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

No, and this is crucial: their premise is perfectly sound. David had wronged Bathsheba, Uriah, and all Israel, yet he prays "Against you, you only, have I sinned," because every sin is finally an offense against God, so only God can forgive sin as sin. I can forgive your debt to me; I cannot forgive your debt to him. Jesus never corrects the scribes' premise. He does something far more shocking: he accepts it and then proves he holds the prerogative. Given their premise, there are only two options: blasphemy, or God is on the mat-side of the room. The scribes chose their answer at 3:6. The whole Gospel asks us to choose ours.

3. **DISCOVERY: Jesus answers with a new title: "that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (2:10). Someone look up Daniel 7:13-14 and read it aloud. What does that background do to the title, and why might Jesus prefer it to "Messiah" or "Son of God"?**

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In Daniel, "one like a son of man" rides the clouds to the Ancient of Days and receives everlasting dominion, glory, and kingdom, an enthronement scene. So the title is a paradox: on the surface it just means "a human being"; underneath it names the figure who receives God's own authority. That is exactly why Jesus loves it. It is true at both levels, it carries no political baggage the crowds could weaponize, and it lets him fill in its meaning himself, which he will do most fully at 10:45 with a definition no one expects. It is the Messianic Secret in a single phrase: revealed and veiled at once.

4. **Levi and the dinner party (2:13-17).** A tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, gets the same call as the fishermen, and Jesus eats at his house with "many tax collectors and sinners." The objection comes; Jesus answers: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." What does the physician image demand of the Church, and what does it forbid?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It demands that the Church go where the sickness is: a hospital that admits only the healthy is a fraud, and a Christian community that makes sinners feel they must get well before approaching Christ has inverted the Gospel. It forbids two opposite errors. First, the Pharisees' error: quarantine, keeping oneself clean by keeping sinners out. Second, the modern error: pretending the sickness is health, a physician who tells the sick they need no cure is not merciful but useless. Jesus eats with sinners AND calls them sinners AND heals them. Note also the irony in "I came not to call the righteous": those who believe themselves well are the only ones the physician cannot help, not because he refuses, but because they will not open the door.

5. **The fasting question (2:18-22).** Jesus' answer: wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, "but the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day." **DISCOVERY:** someone look up Hosea 2:19-20 or Isaiah 62:5. Who is Israel's Bridegroom, and what two things is Jesus therefore claiming?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

In the prophets, the Bridegroom of Israel is the LORD himself, who betroths his people to himself forever. So claim one: Jesus quietly steps into God's own role in the covenant romance; the wedding of God and his people is happening at his table. Claim two, darker: the bridegroom will be "taken away", widely heard as the first whispered hint of the Passion, violence hiding inside a wedding image. And notice what this makes of Christian fasting: we do not fast because the feast never came; we fast because we live between the Bridegroom's being taken and his return. That is why the Church keeps every Friday penitential, through abstinence or another penance, the day he was taken, and feasts on Sundays. Fasting is bridal longing, not gloomy self-improvement.

6. **Grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28).** **DISCOVERY:** someone look up 1 Samuel 21:1-6, the story Jesus cites. Map the parallels: who is David in the story, what is his situation, and what does he receive? What is Jesus claiming by choosing THIS story?

#### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

David in that scene is the anointed king, but not yet enthroned, fleeing a murderous ruling power, and the priest gives him the holy bread of the Presence, which "it is not lawful" for any but priests

to eat, for himself and his companions. The typology is surgical: Jesus is the true Anointed One, not yet enthroned, already hunted (3:6 is coming), whose companions' hunger outranks ritual regulation, because "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Then the thunderclap: "the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." The Sabbath is God's day; its Lord is God. Once again the claim hides in plain sight. File one detail away without comment: the greater David's story, too, runs through holy bread shared with his companions.

### Dig Deeper

Sharp readers may notice that Mark 2:26 says this happened "when Abiathar was high priest," while 1 Samuel 21 names the priest as Ahimelech, Abiathar's father. Be honest: this is a real difficulty, noticed since ancient times, and several serious solutions exist. The Greek phrase can plausibly mean "in the days of Abiathar," a general era reference, and Abiathar, the far more famous priest of David's reign, may name the period or even the scroll-section by convention, much as we might say "in the days of King David" about an event from Saul's final years. The Church does not require one solution, and no doctrine rests on the verse. What the difficulty does helpfully show is this: difficulties like this were left standing rather than smoothed away, a limited but real sign that the text was not tidied up for its critics.

7. **The withered hand (3:1-6). They watch him "so that they might accuse him." Jesus asks: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" They are silent, and Mark records something rare: Jesus' emotions. Find them in verse 5. Then read verse 6. Who allies with whom, and what is the terrible irony of their timing?**

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 5: "he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart", anger and grief together, the response of love to a locked door. The irony of verse 6 is savage: the men who would not permit a healing on the Sabbath walk out of the synagogue, on that same Sabbath, to plan a killing. Pharisees and Herodians, groups otherwise deeply at odds, unite on one project: "how to destroy him." Jesus' question answered itself: they chose "to do harm, to kill." By chapter three, the cross is already on the horizon, and it is there because of who Jesus claimed to be in these five arguments.

8. **STEELMAN, build it strong before you answer it. A thoughtful Protestant friend says: "The scribes were right that only God forgives sins, and that is exactly why I confess straight to God. Confession to a priest inserts a middleman Scripture never authorizes. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). And even where Scripture gives the Church something to do about sins, John 20 was spoken to the apostles in that room; nothing in the text hands that power down to a priest in a confessional centuries later. What the Church has is the commission to preach the Gospel that declares forgiveness. Nowhere does the Bible show Christians confessing to a priest for absolution." Build that case as persuasively as you can, it is sincere, biblical, and jealous for God's honor. Then answer it from tonight's text plus two more passages: Matthew 9:8 and John 20:21-23.**

### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Grant everything true in it: only God forgives sins; Christ is the one mediator; and no priest has one drop of forgiveness that is his own. Catholics affirm all three without crossing our fingers (CCC

1441). And grant the counter-readings their strength: many Protestants read John 20 as the Church's commission to DECLARE forgiveness through the Gospel, and Matthew 9:8 as a crowd's awed acclamation rather than an office; the question is whether those narrower readings survive the texts read together and read with the earliest Church, and whether a commission the apostles could not hand on is what the earliest Church thought it had received; St. Ambrose, writing against the Novatianists, treats the Church's power to absolve as simply given, the same power already at work when sins are remitted in Baptism. Now the answer, from the text. First, Mark 2:10: the stunning phrase is "authority ON EARTH to forgive sins", God's heavenly prerogative deliberately brought down into human history, exercised through a human voice a paralytic could hear. Second, Matthew's account of this same scene ends with the crowd glorifying God "who had given such authority TO MEN" (Matthew 9:8), plural, the Catholic tradition has heard in this story the charter of a continuing ministry. Third, the risen Lord makes it explicit: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23). Forgive OR RETAIN implies discernment, and discernment implies disclosure: this is why the Church has always understood the gift to entail confession (CCC 1448), the inference her sacramental Tradition drew from the beginning. So the priest is not a middleman blocking the one Mediator; he is the one Mediator's chosen mouth, so that forgiveness reaches you the way the paralytic got it: out loud, in your ears, in a real human moment; received with sincere contrition and integral confession, it leaves no room to wonder. The Catholic claim is not that God's forgiveness is rationed through clergy; it is that God, who could forgive silently, loves us too much to leave us guessing, exactly as he attached the paralytic's invisible absolution to a visible walking man "that you may know."

### Send (15 minutes)

1. Whose mat are you carrying right now, and is there a corner you have quietly put down? Who once carried yours?
2. Jesus gave the paralytic forgiveness before the man asked for it, because it was the deeper need. If Jesus read your deepest need tonight, before the requests you usually lead with, what do you suspect he would address first?

### Live It This Week

- Go to Confession before this study ends, this week if you can. Hear the words out loud. If it has been years, say exactly that to the priest; it is his joy, not your shame.
- Reclaim one Friday practice as bridal longing for the taken Bridegroom: a real fast, a meatless day done with intention, or an act of penance offered for one person.
- Do one deliberate act of "Sabbath good" this Sunday: rest that restores, worship that costs, or mercy that inconveniences you.

### Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, Son of Man, you carried heaven's pardon down to a paralyzed man's ears. We are the ones on the mat, and we are the friends at the roof. Give us the humility to be carried, the strength to carry, and the courage to hear your forgiveness spoken out loud. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Together: one Our Father.)

## Scripture Memory Verse

*"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Mark 2:17, RSV2CE)

## Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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**Primary text:** Mark 2:1-3:6

**Every passage used this session, in order:**

- Mark 2:1-12 (the paralytic; authority to forgive)
- Psalm 51:4 (sin is finally against God)
- Daniel 7:13-14 (the Son of Man enthroned)
- Mark 2:13-17 (Levi; the physician)
- Mark 2:18-22 (fasting; the bridegroom taken away)
- Hosea 2:19-20; Isaiah 62:5 (the LORD as Bridegroom)
- Mark 2:23-28 (grain on the Sabbath; lord of the Sabbath)
- 1 Samuel 21:1-6 (David and the bread of the Presence)
- Genesis 2:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Sabbath roots, leader background)
- Mark 3:1-6 (the withered hand; the plot)
- Matthew 9:8 (authority given to men, steelman chain)
- John 20:21-23 (the ministry of forgiveness instituted, steelman chain)
- 1 Timothy 2:5 (steelman objection text)
- CCC 574, 796, 1441-1445, 1503, 2173
- Memory verse: Mark 2:17