

**Mark 1:29-39**

<sup>29</sup> On leaving the synagogue he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. <sup>31</sup> He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them. <sup>32</sup> When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. <sup>33</sup> The whole town was gathered at the door. <sup>34</sup> He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. <sup>35</sup> Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and those who were with him pursued him <sup>37</sup> and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." <sup>38</sup> He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." <sup>39</sup> So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.



Monastery Decani, South Wall, Christ's Miracles (59) - Christ heals Peter's Mother in Law | PD-US

**Context**

The narrative moves quite quickly in the Gospel according to Mark. The narrative's pace and immediacy is one of the most notable attributes of the writing style. Lest one think that Mark is simply concatenating stories without a larger vision in mind, it is always good to "step back" and see the larger framework in which the Gospel account exists.

The first major section of Mark's Gospel extends from 1:14 to 3:6, and describes the initial phase of the Galilean ministry. Within this section the evangelist records the calling of the first disciples, Jesus' ministry in and around Capernaum, and a series of controversies which are climaxed by the decision to seek Jesus' death. While that covers the "big picture," in our Sunday gospels so far: Jesus has proclaimed the Kingdom of God is at hand, called the first disciples to follow him, taught with authority in the synagogue in Capernaum so that the people "were astonished at his teaching", cast out a demon from a possessed person - "He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee." (Mark 1:27-28) Jesus not only

speaks with authority — he also acts with power! The “amazed” bystanders acknowledge the teacher’s authority, yet they still have to ask: “*What is this?*” (v. 27).

In our gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples remain in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Tradition has it that Simon Peter’s home is just across the way from the synagogue in Capernaum. During Jesus’ brief stay in Capernaum, our gospel reading captures the following key moments:

- Healing Peter’s Mother-in-law (1:29-31)
- The Sick Healed at Evening (1:32-34)
- Departure from Capernaum (1:35-39)

Last week’s scene which included the casting out of a demon almost stands in contrast with this week’s less dramatic healing. I would suggest that Mark intends the two stories to be read together – but the editors of the lectionary saw fit to be read on two different Sundays.

The first clue about their connectedness is that v. 29 begins “*and immediately*” (*kai euthus* – for some reason the translators of the NAB reduces the whole phrase to “On” losing the Greek intensity of the phrase). Let me just offer the following about the important contrasts between the first healing (1:21-28; casting out demons) and the second (1:29-31; cure of Peter’s mother-in-law):

man	woman
synagogue (holy place)	house (common place)
(supernatural) unclean spirit	(natural) fever

There is no limit to Jesus’ power and authority. It is for all people, in all places, and in all circumstances (natural and supernatural).

### Commentary

It is very easy to simply note that Jesus cured Peter’s mother-in-law, be swept along in Mark’s breathless pace, and wonder if there is more to the story. Ched Myers (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 141) raises this question at the beginning of his comments on Mark 1:21-39:

These “miracle” stories raise important issues of interpretation. Is Jesus simply “curing” the physically sick and the mentally disturbed? If so, why would such a ministry of compassion raise the ire of the local authorities?

Certainly one can make a case that the ire of local authorities is raised because Jesus does all this on the Sabbath when they are not “emergencies.” The Pharisees and others were not heartless people, but they seem to insist that all this healing and such can wait one more day since it does not involve life threatening situations. They miss the point that these are signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. Or maybe they don’t miss the point and Jesus’ implied claims are the problem. In modernity, such a dynamic is more easily seen than other points of contention. Myers goes on to suggest: “There must be more to these stories than is immediately obvious to the modern reader.”

Ben Witherington III (*The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 98) suggests some possibilities of why Jesus’ actions raised the ire of local authorities:

Though there are later stories of rabbis taking the hand of another man and healing him, there are no such stories of rabbis doing so for a woman, and especially not for a woman who was not a member of the healer’s family (*b.Ber. 5b*). In addition, there is the fact that Jesus performed this act on the Sabbath. Thus, while touching a non related woman was in itself an offense, and touching one that was sick and therefore unclean was doubly so, performing this

act on the Sabbath only compounds the social offense. But this is not all. The service of Peter's mother-in-law to Jesus (and the others) itself could have constituted work on the Sabbath, depending on what was done (.e.g., preparing food). In any case, later Jewish traditions suggest that women should not serve meals to male strangers. The important point about Jesus, however, is that he does not see the touch of a woman, even a sick woman, as any more defiling than the touch of the man with the skin disease. Jesus' attitudes about ritual purity differed from those of many of his fellow Jews.

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law is a somewhat contained story and we, not burdened by 1<sup>st</sup> century ideas of religious purity and uncleanness, do not find the situation one which would raise our ire. Or do we? But in our own lifetime we have considered some people "untouchables," e.g., those with AIDS, with mental illnesses, etc. These are different forms of societal purity and uncleanness. When we consider the underlying attitude of quarantining people who may have been exposed to a virus, we can begin to gain some insight into the 1<sup>st</sup> century viewpoint.

As Ben Witherington noted, it is unlikely that the people wanted Jesus executed just because he miraculously healed people. He threatened their way of thinking, their cultural stereotypes, their understanding of religious purity.

### **Cheated?**

Pheme Perkins (*Mark*, 546) raises the following questions: "How can we read these stories about Jesus, the exorcist and healer, without feeling cheated? God or Jesus has only to will it, and a person is healed. Does God will that person's suffering? If anything would make Jesus angry, it would surely be the charge that God wills the suffering and evil in our world"

While we acknowledge that there is no limit to Jesus' power and authority; that it is for all people, in all places, and in all circumstances (natural and supernatural), we do pause and wonder if such power and authority is active in the world today. What are we to do with miracle stories of healing and exorcisms with people from first century Palestine? Do such stories shine light into our lives? One answer is presented by Richard Jensen (*Preaching Mark's Gospel*, 52) who points out: "The fact is, ... people do still get sick. The fact is that our lives are thwarted by powers and forces over which we seem to have no control." Especially since 9/11 we are aware that terrorists can bring destruction at any time and any place. Even the most powerful country in the world cannot keep evil under its control. Here in 2015, we wonder how ISIS could have risen to power in eastern Syria and western Iraq, declaring itself a caliphate. We look at the events of January 6th (2020) and October 7th (2023) and we wonder what unrest lays just under the surface.

We struggle with the fact that with a word or touch, Jesus can heal; yet, as much as we may pray and touch and anoint a loved one, they often do not become well and restored to society. They die. We may cry out, "Jesus, you healed with a touch, why can't you do the same through me now?" At the same time, we cannot blame God when our sufferings are not immediately removed after prayer. Even Jesus did not escape suffering and death.

### ***The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law***

*<sup>29</sup> On leaving the synagogue he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. <sup>31</sup> He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them.*

The connection with the preceding incident is explicit, indicating that the healing occurred upon the Sabbath. Tradition holds that the house shared by Simon and Andrew was not far from the synagogue at Capernaum. The healing of Peter's mother-in-law is brief and to the point. The few details contained

are told from Peter's point of view, and not once is the name of Jesus introduced into the account. It is not possible to know what disease had caused the illness of Peter's mother-in-law, for in the ancient world fever was regarded as an independent disease and not as a distress accompanying a variety of illnesses. In response to the disciples' request (v.30), Jesus stood beside the bed, seized the woman's hand and lifted her up. The fever was removed and there was no trace of the weakness which could be expected under normal circumstances. As so often in the gospel narrative, the touch of Jesus brought instant healing: *and she waited on them.*

**Restoring Position.** I think modern minds are a bit surprised that the woman seems to immediately rise and begin to serve the guests of her son-in-law. But we have a different sense of hospitality. In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, serving/hosting such a notable person as Jesus would have been something the matron of the house would have insisted upon as a matter of rightful place and honor. Perkins (*Mark*, 546) writes:

Peter's mother-in-law lies wracked with fever. She cannot fulfill the role of preparing and serving a meal to the guests, which would have fallen to her as the senior woman in the household. Jesus' healing restores her to her social position within the household. Many women today react negatively to the picture of a woman getting up after a severe illness to serve male guests. That sentiment hardly seems appropriate to the complex gender and social roles involved in the household. Certainly, Peter's wife or a female servant may have prepared food. The privilege of showing hospitality to important guests falls to Peter's mother-in-law as a matter of honor, not servitude. We even exhibit similar behavior. When special guests are expected for dinner, no one gets near the kitchen without clearance from the person who has the privilege of preparing the food.

Malina & Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 210) present a similar discussion concerning healing and social position.

In the contemporary world we view disease as a malfunction of the organism which can be remedied, assuming cause and cure are known, by proper biomedical treatment. We focus on restoring a sick person's ability to function, to do. Yet often overlooked is the fact that health and sickness are always culturally defined and that in the ancient Mediterranean, one's state of being was more important than one's ability to act or function. The healers in that ancient world thus focused on restoring a person to a valued state of being rather than an ability to function.

Anthropologists carefully distinguish between disease – a biomedical malfunction afflicting an organism – and illness – a disvalued state of being in which social networks have been disrupted and meaning lost. Illness is not so much a biomedical matter as it is a social one. It is attributed to social, not physical, causes. Thus sin and sickness go together. Illness is a matter of deviance from cultural norms and values.

To briefly apply this understanding to demon possession in the last week's text – the demon-possessed were people whose behaviors were socially deviant. Malina & Rohrbaugh go on to say:

Such attribution was something the community would be concerned to clarify in order to identify and expel persons who represented a threat. Freeing a person from demons, therefore, implied not only exorcising the demon but restoring that person to a meaningful place in the community as well.

It is not that long ago in our history when we felt it necessary to expel the mentally ill from normal society. They would be locked up in asylums – not as places of healing, but as places to keep them away from “normal” people. We didn't want “their” strange behaviors disrupting “us”.

Jesus restores Peter's mother-in-law to her proper position in domestic society. Her healing and subsequent actions are not just physical, but also social (according to 1st century standards). If we approach Jesus' actions as also including social healing – restoring people to the community – that presents a new set of issues for parishes.

**“Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.”** The reference to Peter's mother-in-law serves to clarify what it meant for Peter to be confronted by Jesus' summons to follow him. He had a family and a home for which provision had to be made; the call to be a fisher of men demanded total commitment to Jesus. The healing accomplished within Peter's home indicates that salvation had come to his house in response to the radical obedience he had manifested.

### ***The Sick Healed at Evening***

*<sup>32</sup> When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. <sup>33</sup> The whole town was gathered at the door. <sup>34</sup> He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him.*

This summary report reflects the point of view of a narrator who was excited with what he witnessed: “*they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons*”; “*all the city was gathered at the door.*” The incident is intimately connected with the previous narratives by the time sequence, the reference to the door of the home of Peter and Andrew, and the detail of the silencing of the demons. The time indicated is early evening, following the sunset which brought the Sabbath to a close. In response to the report from those present in the synagogue earlier in the day the people were bringing the sick or possessed to the house where Jesus was. In time it seemed as if the whole city was gathered at the door. In this connection v.33 is particularly vivid, the tense of the verb suggesting the growing crowds. Apparently the people delayed their coming until the close of the Sabbath lest the day be infringed by the carrying of the sick or acts of healing when there was no immediate peril to life. In this connection Jer. 17:21 ff., which prohibits the bearing of a burden on the Sabbath, may have been important in popular thinking. Twice in this passage (vv.32, 34) and in Mark 6:13 a clear distinction is observed between general sickness and demonic possession. It is unwarranted to obscure such distinctions with the hypothesis that what was described in antiquity as possession by demons is identical with various forms of psychoses recognized today by the medical profession.

Jesus responded to the expectations of those who came, healing the sick and expelling the demons. The term “many,” in the statement that Jesus healed “many that were sick,” is used inclusively and is equivalent to the “all” of v.32; it reflects upon the large number of those who came for healing. The reference to the demons who knew Jesus is general, but intelligible in the light of the encounter with demonic possession reported in vv.23–26. In that instance Jesus was recognized as the divine Son, the Bearer of the Holy Spirit. As earlier he had muzzled the defensive cry of the unclean spirit, here he silences their shrieks of recognition, for they are powerless before him.

It is not adequate to read this narrative as a report of success in the initial phase of the Galilean mission. The people come to Jesus, not because they recognized his dignity and function but because it is rumored that a miracle worker has come in their midst. Jesus had come to preach repentance and the nearness of the kingdom but the people think only of relief from pain and affliction. They fail to perceive the significance of Jesus' conflict with demonic power. In compassion and grace Jesus extends to them authentic healing, but it is not primarily for this purpose that he has come. In the morning he withdraws from the village and the clamoring crowds.

Witherington (*The Gospel of Mark*, 101) writes about these verses:

We must beware of reading vv. 32-34 as simply a success story. The people are not coming to Jesus for the reason he wants them to come. They come for relief from physical ailments, but

Jesus came to preach the dominion of God. The reader may be meant to think that the crowds did not see the exorcisms and healings as Jesus did – as victories in the conflict with Satan, and as examples that the dominion was breaking in. The crowds may have seen them as only a temporary respite from their woes.

We thus may be able to make some contrasts: the “big picture” (the breaking in of the dominion of God) vs. the “little picture” (temporary respite from woes); the global picture or the community (congregation, neighborhood) vs. me (my life, my feelings). While those who came, even with poorly defined motivations, were healed, Jesus came so that we might see much more than just what might happen to me.

### ***The Decision to Leave Capernaum***

*<sup>35</sup> Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. <sup>36</sup> Simon and those who were with him pursued him <sup>37</sup> and on finding him said, “Everyone is looking for you.” <sup>38</sup> He told them, “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.” <sup>39</sup> So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.*

**The Wilderness.** This narrative, which like the preceding two is told from Peter’s perspective (note v.36 “Simon and those that were with him”), is intended by Mark to be associated with the report of the crowds that came to Jesus for healing the previous evening. This is indicated both by the time sequence in v.35 and the reference to the fresh gathering of a multitude seeking Jesus’ benefactions in v.37. The vivid phrase “*Rising very early before dawn*” may reflect the perspective of Simon, who discovered that Jesus was gone, and initiated the search for him.

The fact that Jesus left the village while it was still dark and sought a solitary place where he prayed is interesting from two points of view. (1) To describe the site of prayer Mark uses a double term meaning literally “wilderness place.” The description is inaccurate geographically, for the land about Capernaum was cultivated during this period. Its reference is to a place of solitude which in some sense recalls the wilderness. This is confirmed from the other two passages where this terminology occurs (1:45; 6:31–33). These passages share certain formal characteristics with 1:35: in each instance reference to the wilderness-place is preceded by an account of Jesus’ preaching and power; he then withdraws from the multitude which seeks his gifts, with the result that the people (in 1:35–37 their representatives) pursue him to the solitary place to which he has gone.

These texts suggest that Jesus deliberately withdraws from the people to return to an area which has the character of the wilderness where he encountered Satan and sustained temptation. The nature of the temptation in each instance may be related to the clamor of the crowds, who are willing to find in Jesus a divine-man who meets their needs and so wins their following. The people, however, have no conception of what it means to go out to the wilderness to bear the burden of judgment, as Jesus has done. He turns from their acclaim, returning to a place which recalls his determination to fulfill the mission for which he has come into the world. The passages which speak of “a wilderness place” thus refer back to the prologue to the Gospel, with its distinctive wilderness-theology.

**Prayer.** (2) The second point of interest is the reference to Jesus’ praying. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is seen in prayer only three times: at the beginning of the account, when his ministry is being defined (Ch. 1:35), in the middle after the feeding of the five thousand (Ch. 6:46), and near the conclusion when Jesus is in Gethsemane (Ch. 14:32–42). These three occasions have the character of a critical moment. The setting for Jesus’ prayer in each instance is night and solitude, for even in Gethsemane Jesus is quite alone in spite of the three disciples who are separated a short distance from him. The situation again recalls the wilderness when Jesus confronts the temptation of Satan, and is sustained by help from God. His strength is in prayer through which he affirms his intention to fulfill the will of



God, which means his submission to the judgment of God on behalf of the many who return to the wilderness without understanding.

**Why He Came.** When the crowds returned to the house in the expectation of finding Jesus, Simon and those with him, presumably Andrew, James and John, looked for him. There is a note of reproach in the statement, “*Everyone is looking for you*” which means, What are you doing here when you should be in the midst of the multitude who are clamoring for you? A very considerable impression had been made in Capernaum, and in the mistaken thinking of the fishermen it was this response which Jesus had sought to elicit.

Jesus’ answer indicates their failure to understand him or his mission. Acts of healing and expulsion of demons, as much as proclamation, entailed a disclosure of the nature of the kingdom of God and constituted a demand for decision. By his decision a person was qualified for participation in the kingdom or marked for judgment. The crowds that gathered in Capernaum had made their decision, but it could not be the appropriate one because it involved not repentance but attraction to Jesus as a performer of miracles. That is why Jesus interrupts the miracles to go elsewhere to proclaim “the gospel of God.” His purpose is not to heal as many people as possible as a manifestation of the kingdom of God drawn near in his person, but to confront men with the demand for decision in the perspective of God’s absolute claim upon their person.

The word of explanation, “*For this purpose have I come.*” may be deliberately ambiguous. It can suggest that Jesus left Capernaum in order to extend his preaching mission elsewhere in Galilee, or that he came from God to proclaim the word over an extended area. In pursuance of his mission Jesus went throughout all Galilee, using the synagogue as a point of contact with the people. Preaching and the expulsion of demons are related facets of this ministry, the means by which the power of Satan is overcome. In this connection it may be significant that there is no reference to acts of healing in the summary statement. Healing is an aspect of the redemption but it demonstrates Jesus’ confrontation with Satan less graphically than the restoration to wholeness of those who had been possessed by demons.

The reference to “all Galilee” serves to recall Mark’s statement that the report concerning Jesus circulated all about Galilee (Ch. 1:28).

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## Notes

**Mark 1:21 Capernaum:** Identified with the ruins at Tel Hûm on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum is one of the few sites specified by Mark as a center of Jesus’ preaching and healing activity. After Jesus began his ministry, he moved to Capernaum. Capernaum had a synagogue which had been built with the sponsorship of the local centurion (Luke 7:2–5). While in Capernaum, Jesus healed several people and taught in the synagogue. The city, however, eventually received a scathing denunciation when Jesus condemned its stubbornness as worse than Sodom’s (Matt 11:23–24). [AYBD 866]

In this connection Jer. 17:21 f., which prohibits the bearing of a burden on the Sabbath, may have been important in popular thinking.

Typical of an unwarranted approach is F. Fenner, *Die Krankheit im Neuen Testament* (Leipzig, 1930), who is strikingly confident that he can explain the healings in the Gospel tradition in the light of modern psychopathology. He identifies various types of hysteria and explains the overcoming of the damage to personality in terms of the powerful personality of Jesus. H. van der Loos is far more satisfying; however, when he treats belief in demons (op. cit., pp. 204–211, 339–361) he is unequivocal that “we are concerned with the mentally ill as they are encountered everywhere and at all times” (p. 210). Against these assertions see the important work of C. Balducci, *Gli Indemoniati* (Rome, 1959),

who compares authentic demonic possession with abnormal psychic phenomena. His investigation indicates that (1) the symptoms of possession are arbitrary, whereas psychotic syndromes are fixed; (2) the possessed react to religious matters but are indifferent to profane matters; (3) in the case of the possessed exorcism may be expected to produce psychic phenomena (such as knowledge of hidden things) which are not necessarily evident in possession itself, but these phenomena cease immediately after the exorcism. Cf. A. Rodewyck, “De Daemoniacis,” *Verb Dom* 38 (1960), pp. 301–306.

**Mark 1:29 *On leaving the synagogue*:** The Greek expression is *kai euthus synagōgēs exelthontes* and elsewhere would be translated “and immediately they left the synagogue.” For some reason the translators of the NAB reduce the whole phrase to “On leaving the synagogue” losing the Greek intensity of the phrase.

**Mark 1:30 *Simon’s mother-in-law*:** Clearly Peter is married; his wife may even have accompanied her husband on his missionary travels later, as she is mentioned specifically by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:5

**Mark 1:31 *waited on them*:** the expression *diakoneō* primarily means table service. The word later comes to mean “ministry” or “office” (*diakonia*), however it would be premature to extend the later meaning to this scene.

**Mark 1:34 *not permitting them to speak*.** After the healing, Jesus continued to perform exorcisms but prevented the demons from giving their testimony. This remark continues the theme of Jesus’ authority from the first exorcism.

**Mark 1:35 *went off to a deserted place, where he prayed*.** In Mark, Jesus goes alone to pray three times: here, in 6:46 (before the miracle of walking on the water), and in 14:35–39 (at Gethsemane). In the midst of a demanding period of ministry, Jesus sought communion with God. Jesus’ private prayer contrasts with what he said about the scribes and their public prayers (12:38–40).

**Mark 1:36 *pursued him*.** The verb used in this description (*katediōxen*) is quite vivid. It means “to hunt someone down” and is often used in a hostile sense (Ps 17:38 in LXX, *Psalms of Solomon* 15:8). Marcus suggests that whereas Jesus had called the disciples to be fishers of people, here they were hunting him down or pursuing him.

**Mark 1:38 *Let us go on to the nearby villages*.** This is a mission statement, indicating that Jesus came to preach to a larger region, and not just to Capernaum (1:24; 2:17; 10:45)

***have I come*.** Lit., “came out,” an expression we do not use much in English. It has the nuance of being sent by God in a calling (Amos 7:14–15; Josephus *Antiquities* 3.400). In 1:24 and here, two reasons are given for Jesus’ coming: to confront evil forces and to preach. These two ideas are repeated in 1:39. The term for “preach” (*kērussō*) both here and in 1:39 is not the term for instruction but for missionary proclamation. It probably refers to preaching the gospel as previously mentioned (1:14–15).

**Mark 1:39 *into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons*.** Jesus’ cosmic battle continued to be a part of his ministry so that his actions matched his words. What he did in Capernaum (1:21–28), he also did elsewhere. ***Galilee*:** Josephus (*Jewish Wars* III.iii.2) described Galilee as a land of great villages: “The cities lie very thick and the very many villages that are here are everywhere so full of people, because of the richness of their soil, that the very least of them contained more than fifteen thousand inhabitants.” In Ch. 1:38 Mark has used a precise term to designate these large agricultural villages which had the size of a city but the structure of a village. His reference, apparently, is to the capital of a toparchy and its subordinate villages. The several tetrarchies were administered by the Herods under the Ptolemaic system of villages grouped into toparchies, with the largest of the villages serving as the capital of each district. Jesus, accordingly, went throughout



Galilee concentrating his preaching mission in the synagogues located in toparchic capitals, confronting the several congregations with the absolute claim of God

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