

Bible Study Guide: Week of 1-25-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 1:21-28

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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At this point in the gospel, Jesus has just called James, John, Andrew, and Simon Peter to be his disciples. As the first stop of his ministry, he comes to a synagogue in Capernaum. It is unclear under what circumstances Jesus would have been allowed to teach as an ostensible outsider. Clearly, the attendees in the synagogue did not expect him to deliver such an eloquent message. Ironically, the scribes *were* the ones with authority to teach Scripture and to guide the listeners in applying the message of Scripture to their own lives. Jesus, however, seemed to be more skilled at this than the teachers the people were used to hearing.

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In the Gospel of Mark, “unclean spirit” is synonymous with “demon.” This man is possessed by a demonic force, in contrast to Jesus whom we saw earlier in Mark 1 had the Holy Spirit enter into him. One element present in Mark’s gospel is this clash of the Spirit of God in Jesus and the “unclean spirits” of this world. Mark is not clear whether this possessed man was a member of the synagogue or simply a one-time attendee who appeared only to cause a disruption. If the former, this story is not just about the healing of this one person or the casting out of one “unclean spirit,” but can also represent the restoration of a community disturbed by a powerful evil force. If the latter, the synagogue members’ unfamiliarity with the man underscores the wild nature of his “unclean spirit” and the power of Jesus to tame such an unwieldy force in an instant. The plural used here in v. 25 (“us”) could be indicative of many spirits possessing the man (see Mark 5:1-20). It is also possible that the plural “us” refers to the spirit possessing the man and to all other unclean spirits. The one speaking here seems to grasp that the coming of Jesus means the end of the reign of unclean spirits in some final sense. The second reading is more likely, given the use of the singular afterwards—“I know who you are...” Interestingly, the unclean spirits know exactly who Jesus is and why he has come, unlike the people who are merely “astounded,” but fail to recognize Jesus’ significance.

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Earlier in Chapter 1, Jesus demonstrated mastery over the tempter in the wilderness. Here, he shows mastery over the unclean spirits, and later in Mark 4:41, the disciples marvel that Jesus commands the obedience of the wind and the waves during a storm at sea. The point is that all the forces that defy God and confound humankind have met their match in Jesus. Notice the repetition of the word “authority” here, which first came up in v. 22. That is a key word, not just in this lesson, but throughout the Gospel of Mark. At issue

over and over is where Jesus got the authority to do what he was doing during his ministry. Although the people don't understand right away what they have witnessed and why it was important, word about Jesus begins to spread.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. (How) do we experience “unclean spirits” or “demons” in today’s culture?**
- 2. What authorities do you think Jesus might challenge if he were ministering on earth today? What would he do that would leave people “astonished” and “amazed”?**
- 3. What does Jesus’ teaching and healing do for the possessed person and for his community? How can we go and do likewise as we follow Jesus?**