

Homiletics Analysis: Mark 2

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Mark 2 presents five escalating conflict episodes that together constitute the opening salvo of opposition against Jesus in Mark's Gospel. The chapter opens with the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof (vv. 1–12), in which Jesus forgives the man's sins before healing him, drawing an immediate charge of blasphemy from the scribes. This is followed by the call of Levi and the dinner with tax collectors and sinners (vv. 13–17), where the Pharisees challenge Jesus' association with the ritually and socially unclean. The question about fasting (vv. 18–22) comes next, as John's disciples and the Pharisees press Jesus on why His disciples do not fast, drawing from Jesus the bridegroom saying and the new cloth/new wineskin parables. The chapter closes with two Sabbath controversies: the disciples plucking grain (vv. 23–28) and the healing of the man with the withered hand (3:1–6, which flows directly from 2:23–28 though technically in chapter 3). Within chapter 2 proper, the grain-plucking episode ends with Jesus' declaration, "The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (v. 28).

The five episodes are not random conflict vignettes. They build a cumulative theological argument: Jesus possesses divine authority — to forgive sins, to call sinners, to redefine fasting, and to rule the Sabbath — and that authority is not a refinement of the existing religious order but its crisis. The religious establishment's opposition is not a misunderstanding; it is the collision of two incompatible systems.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Mark 2 is to confront every hearer with a decision: Who is this man, and what do you do with His claim to be the inaugurator of something entirely new? The passage does not merely inform about Jesus' authority — it presses that authority into the reader's face. The escalating opposition functions as a mirror: the Pharisees' resistance to Jesus over five episodes is not presented as stupidity but as a coherent (if fatal) response to Someone who refuses to fit within any existing religious category. God is calling readers to recognize that Jesus cannot be accommodated within existing frameworks — religious, moral, or social — and to decide whether they will receive Him as the new thing He is, or resist Him as the Pharisees did.

Subject Sentence: Jesus claims divine authority across every contested domain of Jewish religious life.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His readers to confront the radical totality of Jesus' authority — authority that does not reform the existing order but replaces it — and to decide whether they will receive or resist the One who is both Lord of forgiveness and Lord of the Sabbath.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Forgiveness Claim (vv. 1–12)

The most contested interpretive issue in Mark 2 is the christological claim embedded in the paralytic episode. When Jesus says “Son, your sins are forgiven” (v. 5), the scribes' charge of blasphemy is theologically correct on its own premises: only God can forgive sins (v. 7). The question is whether Jesus is speaking as a prophet announcing divine forgiveness (as some liberal scholars and some Jewish-Christian dialogue frameworks prefer) or as the One who himself possesses the divine prerogative to forgive.

The text will not support the prophetic-announcement reading. Jesus does not say “God forgives your sins” or “your sins are forgiven by the Father” — the passive construction that would signal an announcement of another's action. He says “your sins are forgiven” in a way that the scribes immediately identify as a first-person claim to divine authority. The healing that follows is explicitly framed as evidence that “the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (v. 10) — the authority is His own, exercised on earth, in person. The Reformed reading — that this is an explicit, intentional, self-conscious christological claim — is demanded by the text's own argument. Any reading that softens this into prophetic agency evacuates the narrative logic of the entire scene.

Verdict: Refute the prophetic-announcement softening. Acknowledge that the text is genuinely making the hardest possible christological claim — and that this is precisely what the scribes understood it to be.

The New Wine / New Wineskins Saying (vv. 21–22)

Wesleyan and Pentecostal/Charismatic traditions have sometimes used the new wineskins saying to argue for structural openness to new forms of Spirit-led ministry, particularly against institutionalism. This is a partial insight worth acknowledging — the saying does insist that Jesus cannot be poured into old forms. However, the specific context is not ecclesiology or renewal theology. The saying answers the question about fasting: Jesus' disciples do not fast because the bridegroom is present. The “new thing” in view is specifically the presence of Jesus Himself — the eschatological bridegroom — which makes the mourning disciplines of the old covenant temporarily inappropriate. The new wineskins are not generically “whatever new forms the Spirit brings” but specifically “the new covenant order inaugurated by the presence of the Messiah.”

Verdict: Qualify the renewal-theology application. It captures a real implication but overreads the text by detaching the saying from its christological grounding.

The Sabbath Controversy (vv. 23–28)

Dispensational interpretation has sometimes read “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” as supporting the Christian church’s freedom from Sabbath obligation — Jesus cancels Sabbath law for the new covenant community. The Reformed reading distinguishes more carefully: Jesus is not abolishing the Sabbath but is claiming lordship over it — He is its author, its interpreter, and its fulfillment. This is consistent with Jesus’ broader claim in Matthew 5:17 not to abolish but to fulfill. What the Pharisees have done is not uphold the Sabbath but bury it under accretions that serve their own power, and Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath is restoring its original intention (as His appeal to David in vv. 25–26 demonstrates).

Verdict: Qualify the Dispensational application. The passage does establish Jesus’ authoritative lordship over the Sabbath but does not constitute a Sabbath-abolition text. The Reformed reading — Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath who restores and fulfills rather than cancels — better accounts for the appeal to Scripture and the argument’s logic.

The Moralism Temptation (Levi episode, vv. 13–17)

Baptist and broadly evangelical exposition has sometimes turned the Levi call and dinner scene into a missional application: “go be like Jesus and eat with sinners.” This is not wrong as an implication but misses the scene’s primary weight. The scene is fundamentally christological — it is about *who Jesus is* and *what He has come to do* (“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners,” v. 17), not primarily about what His followers should do. Turning the scene primarily into a model for incarnational ministry inverts the text’s own priority. Application should flow from the christological claim first.

Verdict: Qualify. The missional implication is real but secondary. Do not preach the Levi scene as primarily a model for Christian hospitality.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 43:25** — “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake.” The exclusive divine prerogative to forgive sins that Jesus claims in Mark 2:5–10 is grounded in this Old Testament declaration; Jesus’ claim is a direct claim to the identity of the God of Isaiah.
- **Exodus 31:12–17** — The Sabbath as a sign of the covenant between YHWH and Israel; its divine origin grounds Jesus’ claim to lordship over it in Mark 2:28 — He is claiming authority over the covenant itself.
- **Hosea 6:6** — “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” — the passage Jesus invokes in Matthew’s parallel (Matt. 9:13) and the hermeneutical key to the Levi dinner scene: God’s heart for sinners does not subordinate itself to ritual purity categories.

- **Daniel 7:13–14** — The “Son of Man” figure given dominion, glory, and a kingdom — the title Jesus uses for Himself in Mark 2:10 and 2:28 is the Daniel 7 royal-eschatological figure; both forgiveness and Sabbath lordship are claims to this universal sovereignty.
- **2 Corinthians 5:17–21** — “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation... God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” — the new-creation logic of the new cloth and new wineskins (Mark 2:21–22) finds its full articulation here; Paul’s new covenant theology is the theological register in which Jesus’ “new thing” language fully resonates.

Aim: To confront the reader with the totality and radicality of Jesus’ authority — over sin, over religious categories, over the Sabbath itself — and to press the decision: will you receive Him as Lord of everything, or will you, like the Pharisees, find a category in which His authority is unacceptable?

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
2:1–2	Jesus returns to Capernaum; crowds fill the house to hear Him preach	“The word” (logos) — Jesus is teaching before healing; the authority of His word is primary
2:3–4	Four men bring a paralytic; unable to reach Jesus, they break open the roof	Faith expressed in radical, costly, obstacle-removing action
2:5	Jesus sees their faith; says “Son, your sins are forgiven”	Forgiveness is offered before healing; addresses the deeper need first
2:6–7	Scribes reason inwardly: “Who can forgive sins but God alone?”	The charge of blasphemy is theologically coherent on Jewish premises
2:8–9	Jesus perceives their thoughts; poses the question: which is easier to say?	“Perceiving in his spirit” — Jesus has direct access to their internal reasoning
2:10–12	“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — heals the paralytic; crowd is	The healing is evidential — a sign designed to substantiate the forgiveness claim

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
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2:13	Jesus goes out again by the sea; teaches the crowd	Transition — back to public ministry
2:14	Jesus sees Levi at the tax booth; says “Follow me”; Levi rises and follows	The call is identical to the call of the fishermen (1:17–20) — immediate, total response
2:15–16	Jesus reclines at Levi’s table with tax collectors and sinners; Pharisees challenge His disciples	“Many” tax collectors and sinners were following Jesus — the community forming around Him is the wrong kind
2:17	“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”	Jesus’ self-definition as the physician of sinners — mission statement
2:18	John’s disciples and Pharisees fast; question why Jesus’ disciples do not	The questioners are both religious reformers (John) and traditionalists (Pharisees) — a broad front of opposition
2:19–20	The bridegroom saying: cannot fast while the bridegroom is present; days are coming when He will be taken away	The first passion prediction in Mark — veiled, but present
2:21–22	New cloth on old garment; new wine in old wineskins — both are ruined by the incompatibility	The old order cannot contain what Jesus is bringing; incompatibility is structural, not incidental
2:23–24	Disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath; Pharisees charge violation of the law	The Pharisaic Sabbath tradition had developed 39 categories of forbidden labor
2:25–26	Jesus appeals to David eating the showbread in the house of God	David violated Levitical law under necessity — a precedent for reading the law in light of human need and divine purpose

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
2:27–28	“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”	The interpretive principle (v. 27) leads to the christological claim (v. 28) — the argument climaxes in a title

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	2:1–12	The Lord of Forgiveness: Jesus Heals and Forgives the Paralytic
2	2:13–17	The Lord of the Unclean: Jesus Calls Levi and Eats with Sinners
3	2:18–22	The Lord of the New Order: Jesus as Bridegroom and the Incompatibility of Old and New
4	2:23–28	The Lord of the Sabbath: Jesus Reclaims Lordship Over the Covenant Sign

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus claims divine authority across every contested domain of Jewish religious life.

Primary Claim: God is pressing His readers to confront the radical totality of Jesus’ authority — authority that does not reform the existing order but replaces it — and to decide whether they will receive or resist the One who is both Lord of forgiveness and Lord of the Sabbath.

Applications (Five)

1. Recognize that Jesus addresses your deepest need before your felt need.

(*Mind/Belief*) The paralytic came — was brought — for healing. Jesus gave him forgiveness first. This is not a rhetorical delay; it is a diagnosis. Whatever surface-level need you bring to Jesus — healing, relief, resolution, clarity — He sees beneath it to the deeper need:

reconciliation with God, release from the guilt that attaches to your sin before a holy God. The application is cognitive and re-orienting: stop evaluating Jesus' response to you by whether He has addressed your felt need. Ask whether He has addressed your real need. The man walked out healed *and* forgiven — but the forgiveness was the greater gift.

2. Confront the religious categories that keep you from Jesus. (*Affections/Worship*) The Pharisees were not stupid or malicious — they were operating from a coherent and deeply held framework for what holiness looks like. That framework told them Jesus was wrong at every turn: wrong to forgive, wrong to eat with sinners, wrong about fasting, wrong about the Sabbath. The danger is not that you will be a Pharisee by accident — it is that your own sincere religious commitments, even good ones, can become a framework that filters out the parts of Jesus you find unacceptable. Examine the place where Jesus makes you most uncomfortable. That discomfort is not evidence He is wrong. It may be evidence that He is Lord of a domain you have not yet surrendered.

3. Come to Jesus as a sinner, not as a qualified candidate. (*Affections/Worship*) Jesus did not call the righteous. He called sinners. This is not merely an encouraging thought — it is a structural claim about how the kingdom works. If you are waiting until your life is more ordered, your habits more controlled, your record more presentable before you come to Jesus, you have fundamentally misunderstood the physician saying (v. 17). The sick go to the doctor *because* they are sick, not after they recover. The table Jesus sets is for sinners. Come as you are, not as you intend to be.

4. Refuse to reduce Jesus to a religious reformer who improves your existing framework. (*Mind/Belief*) The new wine/new wineskins saying is not gentle. It does not say “Jesus requires some adjustments to your existing spiritual life.” It says the new thing Jesus brings is structurally incompatible with the old containers. This means every attempt to fit Jesus into your existing moral project, your existing self-improvement program, your existing religious tradition — as a resource that upgrades rather than an authority that rules — will end the way new wine in old wineskins ends: rupture. The question is not “how does Jesus fit into my life?” but “how does my life fit under His lordship?”

5. Let Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath reorient your understanding of rest and worship. (*Will/Behavior*) Jesus is not abolishing rest and worship — He is claiming lordship over them, which means they exist to serve His purposes, not to serve as mechanisms of religious control, self-justification, or performance. Practically: your patterns of rest and worship should be governed by the question “what does the Lord of the Sabbath actually intend here?” rather than “what is the minimum required?” or “what do the rules technically permit?” The Pharisees had turned the Sabbath into a burden and a test. Jesus restores it as a gift — “the Sabbath was made for man” — but a gift whose purpose is determined by the One who made it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Mark 2 is one of the most concentrated christological passages in the Synoptic Gospels. In five episodes, Jesus claims authority that the Old Testament reserves exclusively for God: the authority to forgive sins (Isa. 43:25), the authority to redefine Israel's purity and table-fellowship categories, and the authority to interpret and rule the Sabbath (Exod. 31:12–17). The "Son of Man" title in verses 10 and 28 invokes the Daniel 7:13–14 figure given universal dominion — Jesus is not claiming a prophetic authority but a royal-divine one. The chapter also establishes the nature of Jesus' mission with precision: He has come as a physician for sinners (v. 17), as a bridegroom whose presence constitutes a new era (vv. 19–20), and as the inaugurator of a new order structurally incompatible with the old (vv. 21–22). Theologically, this passage demands high Christology — not as a conclusion drawn from the rest of the New Testament, but as the text's own explicit claim.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Mark 2 is foundational for the Reformed understanding of grace as prior to law, and of Christ as the fulfillment of the covenant structure rather than merely a moral exemplar within it. Jesus' declaration of forgiveness before healing establishes the priority of justification — the vertical reconciliation with God — over temporal relief, which is the theological order Reformed soteriology maintains against every form of moralism. The new wineskins saying directly supports the Reformed understanding of the relationship between the covenants: the old covenant forms cannot contain the new covenant reality, not because the Old Testament is wrong but because its provisional structures were never designed to be permanent containers. The Sabbath lordship claim is especially significant for Reformed theology's covenantal treatment of the fourth commandment: Jesus does not abolish the Sabbath but reclaims it as its Lord, which grounds the Reformed reading that the Sabbath principle is fulfilled and transformed (not canceled) in Christ's resurrection and the Christian Lord's Day. Throughout, the chapter insists that grace comes to sinners as sinners — the Levi episode is a worked example of the doctrine that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5).

Main Takeaway

Jesus does not ask permission to enter the domains of your life one at a time — He arrives claiming lordship over all of them simultaneously. He forgave without being authorized. He called a sinner without being invited. He redefined fasting, burial customs, and the Sabbath without negotiating. The only question Mark 2 leaves open is the same one it left open for the Pharisees: will you receive the One who comes with that kind of authority, or will you find a reason — a good, religious, theologically serious reason — to resist Him?

The chapter closes with the Pharisees beginning to plot His destruction. They took the question seriously. So should you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the paralytic episode as primarily a healing story.** The crowd's amazement at the end of the scene (v. 12) focuses on the healing, and preachers sometimes follow the crowd. But the healing is the sign; forgiveness is the substance. The entire scene is structured to make the forgiveness claim the load-bearing element — the healing exists to “prove” it (v. 10). A sermon that makes physical healing the climax has missed the text's own logic entirely.
- **Moralizing the Levi episode.** “Be like Jesus — eat with sinners” is not wrong as a secondary application, but it is the wrong primary move. The scene's weight is on Jesus' self-declaration as physician to sinners (v. 17). Application should first ask: “Are you coming to Him as a sinner who needs a physician?” before it asks: “Are you extending His hospitality to others?” Reversing this order produces a moralistic sermon about missional courage that leaves the gospel unstated.
- **Using the new wineskins saying as a general warrant for innovation.** This is perhaps the most commonly decontextualized saying in the chapter. The “new thing” is not a principle of spiritual renewal generally — it is specifically the presence of the eschatological bridegroom making old mourning practices inappropriate. Preachers who use this text to argue for contemporary worship forms, organizational change, or ministry innovation have detached the saying from its christological anchor.
- **Treating the Sabbath controversy as primarily about Christian freedom from law.** The text does not say “the Sabbath is abolished for Christians.” It says “the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” These are different claims. The first produces antinomianism; the second produces submission to Christ as the interpreter and fulfillment of the Sabbath principle. Preachers should be careful not to use this text to argue that Sunday has no special character — the text, properly read, argues the opposite: it has the character given to it by its Lord.
- **Losing the cumulative argument by preaching one episode in isolation.** Each of the five episodes in Mark 2 is manageable as a standalone passage, and they are often preached that way. But the chapter's primary argument is cumulative — the five controversies together demonstrate the scope and totality of Jesus' authoritative claim. A sermon on only the paralytic or only the Sabbath grain-plucking will be exegetically sound but will miss the chapter's own rhetorical strategy, which is to pile episode upon episode until the reader is confronted with the unavoidable question: who is this man, and what do you do with Him?

- **Failing to name the Pharisees' response as comprehensible rather than cartoonish.** If the Pharisees are preached as obvious villains whose hostility to Jesus is inexplicable, the mirror function of the text is lost. The Pharisees' opposition makes perfect sense within their framework — Jesus is claiming what no human being should claim. The preacher should make the Pharisees' position intelligible enough that the congregation feels the weight of the question, not merely the convenience of being on the right side of history.