

Who Is Jesus? Mark 3:20-35
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We've been away from the Gospel of Mark for a few weeks, but now we return to it. And we resume our study in chapter 3:20-35. The question that confronts us in these verses is "Who Is Jesus?" Jesus is accused by His own family of being a lunatic. He is accused by the scribes of being satanic and demonic. Who is He? Is He out of His mind? Or is He acting by the power of Satan? Or is He who He says He is? Is He truly the Son of God?

In the first part of this message we'll consider this question of "Who is Jesus?" And in examining that question we'll also see the danger of getting this question wrong, because Jesus here speaks of a sin that never has forgiveness, an eternal sin. Those are scary words. The question of Jesus' identity is not insignificant. It is not a question on the same level as what political party you support or what your favorite sports team is. The question of who Jesus is has eternal importance. It is infinitely weighty. Because each one of us sitting here this morning will spend forever in heaven or forever in hell depending on whether we embrace the truth of who Jesus is or reject the truth of who He is. And that will bring us to the last question that this passage raises, and that is, "Who Belongs to Jesus?" At the end of these verses Jesus identifies His true family, those who truly belong to Him.

So the three questions that will guide our study this morning are: Who is Jesus? What is the unforgivable sin? And who belongs to Jesus? As I read this passage notice that it is a story within a story. Mark starts one story, and then inserts another story in the middle, and then concludes the first story. We'll see this literary technique several other times in Mark as well. In this passage the first story has to do with Jesus' family. It is introduced in verses 20-21 and then concludes in verses 31-35. And inserted in the middle is this interaction with the scribes.

Who Is Jesus?

An Accusation from Jesus' family

Verses 20-21 begin with an accusation that comes from Jesus' family. Verse 20 says that Jesus went home. This is probably referring to the house of Peter and Andrew that was mentioned in 1:29 and probably also the same house mentioned in 2:1 where the friends of the paralytic tore apart the roof to lower him down in front of Jesus. This house in Capernaum seemed to function as Jesus' headquarters during His Galilean ministry. And

this is likely the house where He comes again now. And the same thing happens that has happened before—a crowd gathers. And the crowd is so immense and overbearing that Jesus and His disciples cannot even have a meal.

Then verse 21 tells us that Jesus' family heard about this situation. It doesn't actually say "family." It says, literally, "those from Him." It's an ambiguous phrase, but when we realize that these two verses are connected with verses 31-35 we can see that this is a reference to Jesus' family. They heard that this great crowd had gathered around Jesus such that He could not even eat. And so they came to seize Him. They came to arrest Him. They came to subdue Him and remove Him from this crazy scene which He had created. By His miracles He has attracted such a crowd that He can't even find the time or the space to eat a meal. He must be out of his mind. That's what the family concluded. They had known Jesus prior to His public ministry. They had the unique and awkward experience of growing up with a perfect child in the home. Imagine what that would be like! But now that Jesus has launched out and created such a stir in the region, His family finally comes to this point of saying, we have to do something about this. He is out of His mind. He is insane. He has lost His senses.

Joseph has most likely died by this point, because he is not mentioned anywhere during Jesus' ministry. And it's unclear what is going on in Mary's heart during this. She is not necessarily among those who are saying Jesus is out of His mind. But she does come with the brothers, in verse 31, to summon Jesus. We do know from John 7:5 that his brothers did not believe in Him. At least, during His earthly ministry they did not believe in Him. But it is an amazing testimony to the power of the Gospel that his brothers later did believe in Him. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church and the writer of the New Testament letter of James. And Jude also became an inspired writer of the letter by his name in the New Testament. And it's interesting to see that for each of them, James and Jude both open their letters by identifying themselves as "slaves of Jesus Christ." They don't introduce themselves as brothers of Jesus, but as slaves of Jesus Christ. So even though there was a time when they were skeptical of Jesus and even believed Him to be insane, they eventually came to see Him for who He is, and they submitted to His Lordship over them.

Well this passage opens with Jesus' family accusing Him of being a lunatic. They think He has gone out of His mind, and they want to seize Him in order to keep Him from hurting Himself or anyone else or damaging the family reputation.

An Accusation from the Scribes

Following this accusation from His own family, Jesus next receives an accusation from the scribes. And this one is even worse. First He is accused of being a lunatic. Next He is accused of being demonic. Verse 22 says that the scribes who came down from Jerusalem [these are the really important and powerful scribes] were saying, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons he casts out demons.” We already know that the religious authorities hate Jesus. We read earlier in this chapter, in verse 6, that the “Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” Jesus is threatening their authority and challenging their power and prestige, and so they are lashing out against Him with increasing force. They want to take Him out. They want to get Him out of the picture so they can get back to their life of legalism and religious pride.

But notice what they cannot say. As they come to oppose Jesus and seek to discredit Him and destroy His reputation, they cannot say, This man has no power. They cannot say to the people, This man can’t really heal or cast out demons. The scribes know that they can’t even say what Jesus’ family said, that He is out of His mind. The people won’t buy that. They have seen the power and the authority of Jesus, in His healing and in His teaching. It’s undeniable. He heals people supernaturally, instantly, completely. He speaks to unclean spirits, and they obey Him. There is amazing miraculous power that resides in this man, and even the scribes who hate Him do not try to deny that fact.

Instead the scribes are driven to an illogical conclusion. But it’s their only hope. They have to come up with some way of explaining the supernatural power of Jesus while still denying that Jesus is from God. So this is what they say: He is possessed by Beelzebul. We’re not sure where this term comes from, but it is apparently another way of referring to Satan. Then they say, “by the prince of demons he casts out demons.” Their position is to concede the fact that Jesus has supernatural powers, but to assert that those powers come, not from God, but from Satan.

Now look at what Jesus does. Verse 23 says that He called them to Him. This is another display of His authority and power and courage and boldness. He knows these guys are out to kill Him, and that eventually they will kill Him. But He boldly confronts the error of their claims. They were speaking about Him, but He summons them and speaks directly to them. He says, come here men, let me show you how your argument collapses upon itself. And He speaks to them in these parables, these analogies, these illustrations. “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And

if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.” These simple statements show the absurdity of thinking that Jesus is casting out demons by the power of Satan. Satan would not do that. He would not have nearly the power that he does if he was using his power to destroy his own forces. That is a kingdom that cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

In verse 27 Jesus tells them what is, in fact, happening. It cannot be that Jesus is casting out demons by the power of Satan. What is happening, rather, is that Jesus is binding Satan. Jesus is entering the strong man’s house and plundering his goods. Jesus is binding Satan and then plundering his goods. And Jesus can do this because He is stronger than the strong man, Satan. Jesus is stronger than Satan. Let’s not forget it. We don’t need to live in fear of Satan, because we belong to the One who is stronger than Satan.

Jesus comes into the world, Satan’s house, and He plunders Satan’s goods by casting out demons and by bringing people out of darkness into light, bringing the dead to life. Ephesians 2 says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins and that we followed the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience [that’s Satan]. And then it goes on to say that God made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved. It’s saying that we were once dead in sin and under the power of Satan, but because of the great work of Christ we have been raised to life and freed from Satan’s rule. So we see the Gospel here in Mark 3:27, in that Jesus is the One stronger than the strong man. Jesus overpowers Satan and sets the captives free.

Who is Jesus? He’s not a lunatic, as His family said. On the contrary, He has the healthiest mind of anyone who has ever walked this earth. Neither is He demonic, as the scribes said. On the contrary, He is from God. He is the powerful Son of God who came to oppose Satan and defeat Satan and release the prisoners.

What is the unforgivable sin?

Next we come to the question in verses 28-30, what is the unforgivable sin? Jesus has explained to these scribes the absurdity of their accusations against Him. And now He issues a stern warning to them, and to anyone like them, who would endorse these kinds of conclusions about Jesus’ identity. But before we look at the unpardonable sin, we have to notice the extravagance of God’s grace that Jesus speaks of in verse 28. He begins by saying, “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter.” That is an amazing statement! There *is* one sin that will not be forgiven,

which Jesus describes in the next verse. But He first puts the emphasis on the amazing grace of God to forgive any sin, to forgive any blasphemy that we might utter.

If you're an unbeliever with us this morning, I want you to understand this. Please don't ever think that you are too sinful to come to Jesus. I remember talking to a young man once, who was in a juvenile detention center, and he said to me, there's no way God could forgive me for the things I've done. Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you're thinking of the crimes, the lies, the immorality, the slanderous things you've said about God, whatever it may be. Listen, there *is* forgiveness. If you will cry out to God and confess those sins and turn away from them, if you will look to Jesus as the One who died for those sins, then you will be forgiven. Please don't resist the Good News because you think you're not good enough. None of us are good enough. That's why it's Good News! We're all sinners who deserve God's punishment, but through Christ all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter. That is a glorious truth.

And it's against that backdrop that Jesus points out one critical exception. Any sin can be forgiven, except this one that He describes in verse 29—"but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." The previous verse was glorious and wonderful. This verse is terrifying. And it should be. It is meant to be. It is meant as a grave warning to those who brazenly oppose and reject Jesus.

Let's make a few observations here and then try to define what this sin is. First of all, we have to remember the context here, that Jesus' statement is directed at these scribes, the religious elite, those who know much about God and about His Word and have also observed the supernatural power of Jesus. Jesus issues this warning to those who have a tremendous amount of biblical knowledge and have also seen the Messiah before their own eyes. Seeing is not believing. This passage proves that. These individuals knew the Scriptures backwards and forwards, and the fulfillment of all the Scriptures was standing right in front of them, and they rejected Him. They hated Him. They were willing to do anything just to kill Him. They accused Him of being demonic and satanic. It's against this group of people that Jesus directs His warning. James Edwards, in his commentary on Mark, says that "sinners and tax collectors are less likely to commit this sin than are the learned, religious, and moral. In this respect, wickedness poses a lesser problem to the grace of God than do pride and self-righteousness."¹

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), page 123.

It's important for us to recognize the context of this warning, because in many ways we are very much like these scribes. We are familiar with the Scriptures. We come together and study the Scriptures week after week. We talk about the Messiah and the Good News of what He has done for us. And we have also seen the mighty works of Jesus among us. We see Him changing lives. We see Him answering prayers. We see Him sanctifying us and refining us and blessing our fellowship together. And we see that He is not only at work here, but around the world. And therefore if we were to reject these realities, if we were to dig in our heels and deny that Jesus is who He says He is, then we would find ourselves in the crosshairs of this terrifying warning.

The second observation is to see the connection with verse 30. Mark adds this explanatory comment that brings this section to a close. Verses 22 and 30 are like bookends, saying basically the same thing. Verse 22 quotes the scribes saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." And then here in verse 30 Mark adds again, "for they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" In other words, this was the nature of their sin, which Jesus is calling an eternal sin, a sin for which they will never be forgiven.

And related to this is the fact that Jesus calls this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus performed miracles and cast out demons. So to say that those mighty works were done by the power of Satan is to slander the Holy Spirit.

Another thing to observe here is that the text does not actually say "unforgivable sin." That term may actually be misleading if we think that it means there is a certain kind of sin that God is incapable of forgiving. If that were the case it would challenge what we know about the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death. It would imply that Christ's death cannot pardon *every* sin. But that is not the way the text reads, and that's not the way we should understand this. It's not that there is a particular sin that God cannot forgive, a particular sin that Christ's death cannot atone for. What verse 29 says, simply, is that "whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness . . ." And if we ask, why will this person never have forgiveness, the answer is because this person will never seek forgiveness. The deficiency is not in God. The deficiency is not in Christ's atonement. The deficiency is in the hardness of the sinful human heart that persistently rejects the clear evidence of who Jesus is, who persistently refuses to repent.

Finally, we should notice that many of the sins which people have assumed are the unpardonable sin are not mentioned here. Murder is not the unforgivable sin. Suicide is not the

unforgivable sin. Adultery is not the unforgivable sin. Taking the Lord's Name in vain is not the unforgivable sin. Those are all horrible sins. They are all infinite offenses against our holy God, as is every sin. They are all deserving of eternal punishment in hell. But they will all be forgiven for those who are repenting and believing. You can think of the most horrific sins imaginable, the most heinous crimes, the grossest immorality, even horrible blasphemies uttered against God—all of that can and will be forgiven in the lives of those who repent of those sins and place their hope in Christ.

What is the unforgivable sin, then? What is the eternal sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? What is it that puts a person in this category of those who will never have forgiveness? In the specific context of this passage it involves individuals who know the Scriptures and have seen the works of Jesus, but who reject Jesus and say that He is from Satan.² And there may be people sitting here today who are doing essentially the same thing, or are in danger of becoming hardened in this way. Maybe you wouldn't put it exactly how the scribes did. But it could be that the hardness in your heart is approaching this level of antagonism. Let this verse be a warning to you. If you are sitting under the preaching of God's Word, and you have experienced the fellowship of a Gospel-centered church, and yet you reject Christ and deny His power, then you find yourself in a very scary position. Be warned that if you continue on that path you may never turn back. You may never have forgiveness. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to knowingly reject the power of the Spirit manifest in Jesus' life and to persist in that hardness and rebellion against God. If you see that in your heart this morning, please repent and come to Christ and receive forgiveness.

And now I want to address others of you who may be anxious about whether you have committed the unforgivable sin. Maybe you have had misperceptions about what the unpardonable sin is, and hopefully studying this passage together has clarified some things for you. But let me tell you this also: if you are concerned that you may have committed the unforgivable sin, that concern that you feel is very good evidence that you have not, in fact, committed the unforgivable sin. Because those who do commit this sin, persisting in unbelief and willful disregard for Christ and rejection of who He is—those who do commit the unpardonable sin do not care in the least. They are so hardened in their opposition to Christ that they don't care what consequences may come. So if you are concerned, that is a good sign. It means there is hope. It means God is at work in your

² See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), page 508.

heart, convicting you of sin and giving you a desire to seek Him and to seek His forgiveness. And rest assured that those who genuinely seek His forgiveness will find it. If you turn away from your life of sin and embrace Jesus as the treasure of your life, then you have not committed the unforgivable sin. Whatever you have done, however shameful and appalling it may be, there is forgiveness for those who will let go of their rebellion and bow the knee.

Who Belongs to Jesus?

Lastly, let's look at verses 31-35 and ask the question, Who belongs to Jesus? This is a continuation of the story that began in verses 20-21. Jesus' family thinks He is crazy, and they come to seize him, as it says in verse 21. In verse 32 the report comes to Jesus that His mother and brothers are "seeking" Him. And that word for seeking is used 10 times in Mark and it has negative connotations. It is used of those who were seeking to destroy Jesus, seeking to arrest Him, seeking to betray Him, seeking testimony against Him. So we realize that Jesus' family here was not seeking Him in terms of trusting in Him. They were seeking Him in order to detain Him, to seize Him, to arrest Him and take Him away from His ministry.

In Jesus' response we find a radical redefining of who belongs to Him. In verse 33 He asks rhetorically, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And in this poignant scene He looks about at those who sat around Him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" Ironically, His biological family was outside the house, and His disciples—His true family—was inside the house, gathered around Him. Verse 35 defines His true family. "For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." And what is the will of God? In the context of what we've seen so far in the Gospel of Mark, it is to repent and believe in the gospel, as Jesus' said in 1:15. Those who will depart from the ways of the world and gather around Jesus' feet constitute the true family of Jesus. These are the ones who truly belong to Him. It's not about physical descent. It's about repentance and faith.

And what an awesome thing it is that because of the Gospel we have become part of the same family, a family that has bonds far stronger than any earthly family. We should not hope or despair due to our family of origin. But instead we rejoice that we have been adopted into the family of God.

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

In closing I want to challenge us again to consider the question, Who is Jesus? Again and again in this Gospel we are confronted with this question, and I pray that our lives will be

changed as we see His power and authority. And as the scribes oppose Him, and even His own family questions His sanity, His true identity just becomes clearer and clearer. It is obvious that He is not insane. It is obvious that He is not from Satan. He must be the Son of God.

C. S. Lewis may have had this passage in mind when he wrote his famous quote about Jesus being either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. In his book *Mere Christianity* he writes this. “I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”³ Lewis warns us against claiming that Jesus was merely a great moral teacher. And our passage this morning warns us strongly against concluding that Jesus was either a lunatic or demonic. There is only one option left. He is Lord. He is the Son of God. He is who He claimed to be.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; orig. published 1943), page 56.