

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Genesis 3:9-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother

Mark 3:20 The crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind (**ex-estē**).”

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”

23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

Mark 3:28 “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— 30 for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Mark 3:31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside (**exō**), they sent to him and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside (**exō**), asking for you.” 33 And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The passage before us manages to be both intriguing and disturbing. It is intriguing because it gives us a window onto the perception of Jesus’ own family. This account of their reaction to Jesus is likely to be historical, on the basis of the criterion of embarrassment. It is also disturbing: what could this “sin against” the Holy Spirit mean? Is there really such a thing as a sin which *cannot* be forgiven?

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

You shall not permit a female sorcerer to live. (Exodus 22:18)

No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. (Deuteronomy 18:10–11)

Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay injured; so he sent messengers, telling them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury.” But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Get up, go to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’” (2Kings 1:2–3; cf. also vv. 6 and 16).

KIND OF WRITING

We have here a kind of transitional passage, bridging the the appointment of the Twelve in 3:13-19 and the parables in chapter 4. Often in Mark, stories take the form ABA*:

A. 20-21 Jesus’ relatives; true discipleship

Thought for the day

In our time, those who “persist” in religious faith can seem to those outside “beside themselves.” The question needs to be asked: who is more sane, those who say life has a deep purpose and meaning and those who evidently content themselves with a “this world only” view. The apparently more rational view is ultimately irrational, in the literal sense that life has finally no *reason*, no *ratio*. By contrast, for the believer, behind the gift of creation stands a Giver. Within the gift of love, we come to know the Lover. As we give and lose in life, finally nothing is ever truly lost. Faith is ultimately wholesome and utterly sane.

Prayer

Father, help us to see your goodness at work around us. As we acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit, may we drawn to you, the giver of every gift.

B. 22-30 Controversy with the scribes
A*. 31-35 Jesus’ true family.

The *frame* (family / discipleship) and the *centre* (gross misunderstanding of Jesus’ ministry) are intimately connected as always.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Family

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29–30)

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offence at him. (Mark 6:3)

Demons / unclean spirits

Demons (Mark 1:32, 34, 39; 3:15, 22; 5:15–16, 18; 6:13; 7:26, 29–30; 9:38;

16:9, 17) and unclean spirits (Mark 1:23, 26–27; 3:11, 30; 5:2, 8, 12–13; 6:7; 7:25; 9:25) are mentioned regularly in the first part of Mark's narrative (1-9) and not at all in the second part (16:9-20 is an addition). Before chapter 3, there are important mentions but we have to wait until Mark 5 for a full-blown exorcism.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is mentioned more often in Mark than one might have imagined. Mark 1:8; 3:29; 12:36; 13:11: the Baptism, the sin against the Holy Spirit, the inspiration of the Psalms and the one who will provide us with words.

ST PAUL

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. (1Corinthians 12:3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 20 This feeling of immense pressure is found earlier in Mark, when Jesus has hardly time even to pray.

Verse 21 The term "he was beside himself" (= *exestē*) is used elsewhere to indicate the static amazement of the crowds (2:12; 5:42; 6:51 and, perhaps, 16:8). Here, in contrast, it refers to Jesus' own state of mind. His own family think he has gone out of his mind, a condition attributed in antiquity to demonic forces. The verb to restrain / seize is used in the arrest of Jesus (14:1, 43, 45, 46, 49). Thus the family's misapprehension leads directly into the overt claim that Jesus is under the power of evil spirits.

Verse 22 When special powers are evident, it is sensible to query their origin. The accusation here is that Jesus is practicing magic. In all probability, the original Baal-zebul (= *Baal the prince*) was consciously distorted to the eponymic Baal-zebul (= *Lord of the flies*) as an insult in 1 Kings 1:1-16. Beelzebul is found outside the Gospels only in the *Psalms of Solomon*, where he is identified as the prince of demons. Because the scribes are *from Jerusalem*, there is a link with the great controversies in 2:1-3:6, already recounted.

Verse 23 Evidently, the complaint had not been made directly to Jesus, as in Mark 2:16. His retort leads to a series of parabolic sayings, that is, analogies.

Verses 24-25 Both government and home are used to show that a system of power divided *against itself* cannot stand.

Verse 26 The comparisons are applied to Jesus' ministry. His enemies had already admitted he had power to exorcise. Even if they are right (and they are wrong), even so Satan's power is broken.

Verse 27 This parabolic story takes its force from the reader's awareness that Jesus already has the Holy Spirit as God's beloved Son (1:10, 12). In the Jewish tradition, Solomon was empowered to use good spirits to defeat evil spirit: *Then it happened that while I was praying to the God of heaven and earth, there was granted me from the Lord Sabaoth through the archangel Michael a ring which had a seal engraved on precious stone. He said to me, "Solomon, Son of David, take the gift which the Lord God, the highest Sabaoth, has sent to you; (with it) you shall imprison all the demons, both female and male, and with their help you shall build Jerusalem when you bear this seal of God."* (Testament of Solomon 1:6–7)

The plundering of the house means that the evil owner has been comprehensively defeated. Mark may have in mind a passage of Isaiah: *Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? But thus says the LORD: Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued; for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.* (Isaiah 49:24–25)

Verse 28 An oracular introduction, giving special significance to what follows.

Verses 29-30 V.29 immediately contradicts v.28. It does happen in the Bible that a general statement is followed by a specific exception: Gen 2:16-17 or Ex 12:10. This problematic verse is best given its contextual meaning from the gloss in v.30: the scribes sided against the Holy Spirit and as long as that is their stance, they remained somehow beyond forgiveness. This sin is different to a single misdeed; instead it indicates false fundamental option.

Verses 31-32 The family turns up again, this time mentioning his mother and in the second verse including the sisters (see Mark 6:3 above). NB the emphasis on being outside (*exō*): they think Jesus is "outside himself" thus revealing themselves to be true outsiders.

Verse 33 This is shocking and meant to be. The repudiation of blood ties would have sounded just as harsh then as now. It does affirm Jesus' choice and creation of the "fictive" family of the faith, which is preferred explicitly. See Mark 10:29-30 above. Thus, doing the will of God will indeed look crazy to some peo-

ple. Suddenly the frame makes sense: misunderstanding Jesus is resistance to the Holy Spirit.

Verse 34 Those listening *to him* are his true relatives. Cf. Mark 4:9. The family remains outside and the insiders are those who listen. This contrast of inside / outside sets the stage for Mark 4, where the narrative moves deftly from outside to inside and back again. Again on account of the criterion of embarrassment, this scene is historical because it is awkward to recall that Jesus' own family did not recognise him.

Verse 35 The concrete is rendered general in this sweeping statement. This is the only occurrence of the will of God in Mark. Thus Jesus and his followers, far from being magicians, are precisely those who do the will of God. This is wider than the similar verse in Matthew 12:46 and Luke 8:21.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. It can be the case that within the family of the faith a deeper and more personal conversation is possible than with our blood relatives. Even with relative strangers, it is possible to reach a deep level quickly on account of the shared experience and worldview.

2. To be divided against ourselves / myself is both common *and destructive*. Like Paul in Romans 7, we all know this sense of being pulled in different directions. Consistent choosing of the good will eventually shape within us an orientation towards God and his will.

3. A strong sense of tradition (good in self) can blind us to both the necessary and the new. Those "from Jerusalem", meaning people in leadership, are at special risk. Remember: *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.* (Mark 2:22)

PRAYER

God our redeemer, in Jesus your promised Messiah, you crushed the power of Satan.

Sustain your Church in the struggle against evil, that, hearing your word and doing your will, we may be fashioned into a household of true disciples who share in the victory of the cross.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.