

Mark 3:20-35, Jesus Doubted by Kin and Country

20 Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. 21 And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." 23 And he called them to him and said 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 is coming to an end. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house. 28 Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— 30 for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

31 And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. 32 And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." 33 And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

In our last lesson, we learned that 1) Whatever the threats, dangers, obstacles, and disappointments, the Gospel will go forth as God gives opportunity; and 2) The church must preach the Gospel to all people brought into its orbit, leaving the business of conversion to the Holy Spirit.

In this lesson we will learn that 1) Jesus was doubted by his family and his people; and that 2) Whoever does the will of God is of the true family of Jesus.

I. Mark's "Sandwich" Technique - Several times in this gospel Mark uses a literary technique some have called the "sandwich" technique. Using two related stories, Mark begins the first story but at some point interrupts it and slides in the second story. Then he picks up again with the first story and concludes it. In today's Scripture reading I have inset the second story in order to help you see the structure.

What is the purpose of the sandwich technique?

- a) It helps create a sense of elapsed time in a two-part story requiring it. For example, in the first story of today's reading, Jesus' relatives have to travel from Nazareth to Capernaum in order to "seize him". Inserting the story of the scribes accusing Jesus gives the impression of time passing between the leaving of the family in v. 21 and their arrival in v. 31.
- b) It creates suspense and interest in the conclusion of the first story.
- c) It allows two theme-related stories to be compared in order to highlight the theme.

II. Jesus Doubted by His Family -

1. "Then he went home" - Some older translations, and some modern revisions of these translations, (KJV, NKJV, ASV, RSV, NRSV) situate this sentence at the end of v. 19. Most modern translations place it at the beginning of v. 20. I could find no explanation for this unusual variety.

The Greek simply states that he entered "a house". Many commentators believe he went back to Peter and Andrew's house in Capernaum:

"The only [house] specifically identified so far (apart from a visit to Levi's house in 2:15) has been that of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum (1:29), and it is generally assumed that Mark intends us to understand

that it was this same house to which Jesus returned as his Capernaum base in 2:1. It would naturally follow that the same house is intended here...⁽¹⁾

2. "the crowd gathered again" - While the Greek does have an article before "crowd" (*ho ochlos*), some scholars insist it should not be translated "the crowd":

"It would not be correct to say 'the *same* crowd': it is simply the gathering together again of a crowd about Jesus ... The occurrence of the article in Greek does not require one to translate as 'the crowd', identifying these people with the group in 3:9."⁽²⁾

The NIV says, "again a crowd gathered".

3. "his family" - The Greek phrase simply means a group of people close to Jesus and is not specific to his family; the same phrase could mean also his friends or his disciples. The KJV has "friends" and the 1599 Geneva Bible has "kinsfolk" (proving that this is not a difference found only in modern translations). The literary structure of the passage, however, argues for the identity of this group of people with "his mother and brothers" in v. 31. This is the way Calvin understood it:

"It is wonderful that such wickedness should have been found among the relatives of Christ, who ought to have been the first to aid him in advancing the kingdom of God."⁽³⁾

Having heard reports that the crowds are keeping Jesus from eating regular meals, his relatives think "he is beside himself," i.e., "he is out of his mind". They decide to travel to Capernaum and "seize him". The strong Greek word here is also used in Mark 14:44: "Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard.'" "The family wanted to get hold...of Jesus, to take control of his actions..."⁽⁴⁾

III. Jesus Doubted by His People

1. "scribes who came down from Jerusalem" - Word of Jesus had travelled to Jerusalem. These "would have greater prestige and authority than the provincial scribes."⁽⁵⁾ Some scribes were in fact members of the Sanhedrin,⁽⁶⁾ as could have been these. In any case, the Jerusalemite scribes represent the leadership of the nation and their collective opinion about Jesus. Shadows of the cross can be seen here.

2. "Beelzebul" - This name is spelled several different ways in different manuscripts. The KJV has "Beelzebub," which is probably more culturally familiar to most. However, that form exists only in Latin and Syriac manuscripts, being found "in no Greek [manuscript]."⁽⁷⁾ Opinions vary as to what the word "Beelzebul" precisely signifies, and whether it is synonymous with "the prince of demons" or an altogether different spiritual power. There is not much to be gained in trying to sort through the options. The important thing to note is that both terms denote powerful beings aligned with Satan, perhaps even different titles of Satan himself. This is made clear by Jesus' reply, "How can Satan cast out Satan?"

3. "said to them in parables" - Parables are not just down-home illustrations for simple folk. Parables are used to conceal the truth from some and reveal it to others as a judgment upon spiritual blindness (Mark 4:11-12). "Jesus began to teach in parables in view of the blindness of his family and the blindness of the teachers of the law."⁽⁸⁾

Parables are also used to reveal the sins of powerful people and declare the Lord's judgment upon them. For example, Nathan confronted King David about his adultery and murder in a parable (2 Sam. 12:1-15). Christ is here a great prophet confronting the powerful but blind rulers of Israel with their sin.

a. The First Parable: A Divided People -

It is known from experience that kingdoms and houses that are divided weaken and fall. If Satan is, through Christ (as is alleged) casting out his own demons, he is fighting against himself and weakening his own kingdom and house. Why would he do that?

b. The Second Parable: The Strong Man -

On the other hand, if someone is plundering the goods of a strong man's house (i.e., freeing people from demonic possession), he must be stronger so that he can bind him. That Christ must be stronger than Satan, to a man with eyes to see, would reveal the divine origin of Jesus' power. Jesus is the one who bound the strong man, "and the implication that he is stronger than Satan

reminds us not only of the Baptist's statement that the one who follows him is mightier...than he, but also of the temptation narrative and its implied result: it is because Jesus has already overcome Satan that he is able to **plunder his goods** by releasing men and women from his power."⁽⁹⁾

c. The Third Parable: The Unforgivable Sin -

The unforgivable sin involves such depth of blindness that one is unable or unwilling to tell the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit and that of the unclean spirits. And it involves continuing on that path in the face of all evidence. It is the end of a long trail of resistance to the truth, suppressing it in unrighteousness, and searing the conscience as with a hot iron. To attribute to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit is to stand on the edge of the Abyss and stare into its eternal fire. Jesus warned the scribes to turn from their scorn. They did not pay heed.

a. The Unforgivable Sin Today - "This sin takes its contemporary forms. It is the sin of regarding conversion to Christ and obedience to him as Lord as the ultimate folly. This was precisely the wilful blindness to Christ and hardness of heart against him which these theologians had begun to display."⁽¹⁰⁾

b. A Word of Comfort - "I cannot tell you how many times in my teaching career very distraught Christians have come to me to ask about the unpardonable sin and whether they might have committed it ... I would say that worrying about it is one of the clearest evidences that they have not committed this sin, for those who commit it are so hardened in their hearts they do not care that they commit it."⁽¹¹⁾

c. A Word of Warning - "It is often said, with some wisdom, that if you are anxious that you have committed blasphemy against the Spirit, you need not fear -- for this blasphemy is always accompanied by complete indifference to such sin. But that advice cannot be treated casually, for the person who sins against the Lord, and is at first sensitive to the potential consequences of his sin, may one day be the very person who becomes indifferent to it. The vital thing is to retain that sensitivity throughout the whole of our lives. It can be retained only by keeping close to Christ; and doing so will guard us from such sin."⁽¹²⁾

IV. The True Family of Jesus

1. Comparing the Family and the Scribes -

"The insertion of 3:22-30 within the narrative of the coming of Jesus' family to restrain him (Ch. 3:20 f., 31-35) suggests a parallel between the insensitivity and unbelief of the scribes and the attitude of those who should have been closest to him. This is the requisite background to Jesus' pronouncement concerning his true family."⁽¹³⁾

a. The Family -

The family of Jesus did experience an episode of doubt, in which they questioned whether Jesus was behaving rationally. Their motive included concern for the well-being of Jesus, though it may have been mixed with concern for the family reputation. But at no point did they attribute his works to Satan. Nor are they mentioned in connection with the unforgivable sin as are the scribes. The comparison thus involves contrast.

b. The Scribes -

The scribes doubted Jesus from the beginning and never waived.. Lack of faith and a desire to curtail the ministry of Jesus are the points at which the family and the Jewish leaders converge. But, as we have noted, the sin and blindness and intransigence of the scribes was much deeper than that of the family. At least some of the family was restored to faith (Mary) or later came to believe (James and Jude), but the scribes never heeded the warning of Jesus. "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11).

2. The True Family -

The lack of faith and opposition of Jesus' own family put them for now outside the family of faith. Mary would soon recover her faith in her son, perhaps even at his rebuke, while at least some of his brothers

would come to believe also: ("All these [the apostles] with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers", Acts 1:14). The true family of Jesus were then and are today those who receive him in faith, and who do "the will of God".

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). We have been born again of the Spirit, who makes us "a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). We are enable by the same Spirit to do the will of God through faith, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Let us rejoice in our adoption, and through the Spirit strive "to grow together to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Notes

1. France, R. T. The Gospel of Mark [NIGTC], pp. 164-165.
2. Bratcher and Nida. A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark [UBS Helps for Translators], p. 116.
3. Calvin, John. Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, v. II, p. 63.
4. Taylor, Vincent. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Thornapple Commentaries]. P. 236.
5. Cranfield, C. E. B. The Gospel According to St. Mark [The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary], p.135.
6. Meyers, Allen C., ed. The Eerdman's Bible Dictionary, p. 917.
7. Taylor, Vincent. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Thornapple Commentaries], p. 238.
8. Schweizer, Eduard. The Good News According to Mark, p. 85.
9. Hooker, Morna. The Gospel According to St. Mark [Black's New Testament Commentary], p. 116.
10. Ferguson, Sinclair B. Let's Study Mark, p. 46.
11. Sproul, R. C. Mark (St. Andrews Expository Commentary), pp. 70-73.
12. Ferguson, Sinclair B. Let's Study Mark, p. 46.
13. Lane, William L. The Gospel According to Mark [NICNT], p. 147.