

# Reading for June 10th

## Mark 3:20-35 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. <sup>21</sup> When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." <sup>22</sup> And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." <sup>23</sup> So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. <sup>27</sup> In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin." <sup>30</sup> He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit."

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." <sup>33</sup> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. <sup>34</sup> Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

## Jesus – In Collusion With The Devil?

Today's events take place in a crowded home when Jesus and his followers return to Capernaum. Mark combines two stories that are linked to the theme of a house or a home. There is a literary connection at the beginning and the end of the passage with Jesus' *family* and in the middle there is a discussion about a *house divided* being unable to stand. Last Sunday, I talked about Jesus being the "Lord of the Sabbath" and how this bold statement brought Jesus into conflict with the religious leaders of his day. In Mark's account, much has happened since then. Jesus has made a tour of the region going as far as the Mediterranean Sea. Crowds of people flocked to him and we are told he "cured many."<sup>1</sup> He also exorcised the demon possessed, or those with "unclean spirits" – as Mark puts it. Some of them shouted, "You are the Son of God," and so Jesus silenced them in an attempt to keep his true identity secret at this early stage of his ministry.<sup>2</sup> He then went to a mountain and appointed his twelve disciples to proclaim his message and gave *them* authority to cast out demons.<sup>3</sup>

Mark clearly has a thing about demons! And we find that emphasis bizarre in our scientific age. While some instances may be manifestations of mental illness, or epilepsy, or some other condition, we would be wise not to merely equate *all* such incidents to well-accepted medical causes. In Mark's day such behavioural manifestations were understood in terms of the conflict between good and evil.

Now Jesus was clearly getting a reputation as a healer and exorcist. Moreover, this is the very *first* time Jesus' family is mentioned in Mark's gospel, and he does not present them in a favourable light at this point in time. News of Jesus's antics must have reached his home town of Nazareth, about 50 km (30 miles) from Capernaum, and they came to instigate a family "intervention"! They were embarrassed and ashamed by what they had heard, and were concerned that Jesus was going mad!

Mark then switches the scene to the reaction from religious legal experts who had come from Jerusalem, some 140 km (85 miles) away. These "scribes" accuse Jesus as being "possessed by Beelzebul, the prince of demons."<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, "Beelzebul," and its variant "Beelzebub," are Hebrew corruptions of ancient Canaanite deities, but, by the first century, they were equated with Satan, the ruler of the demons. This allegation is no joke; it is a deadly serious accusation that could result in Jesus being either banished or executed for performing dark magic. Mark presents this claim as an escalation in the attacks from the religious establishment.<sup>5</sup>

Let's pause and think about this for a moment. Many today will find it difficult to imagine how Jesus' healings could have led to such hostile interpretations. Yet don't we too have suspicions of those preachers with mass appeal and a reputation for healing, and wonder if they are being fraudulent in

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:10.

<sup>2</sup> See also Mark 1:23-26, and 1:1.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 3: 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:22. "Beelzebul" ("god – Baal – of the house/residence, even "Temple" – which also ties in to Mark's context of a house/home) or its variant "Beelzebub" ("god – Baal – of the flies"; see 2 Kings 1:2) are Hebrew corruptions of ancient Canaanite deities. In Mark's day it was pejoratively associated with the arch-demon, Satan (or the devil).

<sup>5</sup> These were official scribes, not Pharisees. See also Mark 2: 7, 24, 3:2, 6.

some way? This particular accusation is a powerful witness to the historical fact that Jesus *was* doing remarkable things. The early church didn't make up this story about people saying that he was mad, or in league with the devil. (Why would the gospel writers do that?) Equally important, people only say that kind of thing when the stakes are high, and when something *is* happening for which there is *no other* explanation – in this case, when there is a power at work healing people who seem to be in the grip of evil forces. Mark, of course, wants us to understand that this is *precisely* what is going on! That is why his gospel opens with all this drama involving healing and exorcisms. Mark also tells us early on that John the Baptist said that Jesus was someone more *powerful* than him.<sup>6</sup> Mark presents Jesus as having “endured” the temptation in the wilderness, thereby overcoming Satan and, consequently, he is now in able to make inroads into Satan's territory. Recall too that Mark's *readers* know that the demons recognize Jesus as “the Holy One of God” and, consequently, he is definitely not one of their number! And the Jewish leaders don't like what Jesus is doing because it doesn't fit into their categories. So he must be labeled in such a negative way so that people will no longer take him seriously. How better to do that than to say that he is in league with Beelzebul? This was an attempt to control the “narrative” and label it as “fake news”! Jesus does not respond by lashing back with an instant label for *his* accusers. Instead, he cleverly points out the logical flaw in their thinking.

Incidentally, Jesus accepts that life is a struggle between the power of evil and the power of God. He did not waste his time speculating about problems to which there was no answer. He did not stop to argue the *origin* of evil, but in *dealing* with it – boldly and effectively.<sup>7</sup> One of *our* problems is that we can spend a good deal of time discussing the origin of evil, and less time working at practical methods in tackling the problem. Look at this way: When we discover a fire, we leap into action and beat it out with whatever makeshift methods are close at hand. We don't first look at someone's PhD thesis as to the origin and nature of fire! Jesus did not speculate about evil, but dealt with it - and he empowered his followers to also overcome evil, and to do what is right and good.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus responds to his accusers indirectly, speaking in “parables.”<sup>9</sup> In this context, a “parable” is not a memorable story with a meaning, but the riddle or a proverb that contains a pertinent message. Jesus points out the absurdity of Satan casting out himself. Or, put in a different way, why would a senior devil want to exorcise a junior devil?<sup>10</sup> That would defeat the very purpose of evil. If there were such in-fighting within the forces of evil, the outcome would be to *weaken* evil's influence in the world. If there is a civil war between the devil and his demons, then Satan's kingdom must be coming to an end! And this would simply reinforce the notion that the kingdom of God is indeed arriving! That is, of course, precisely the message Jesus is proclaiming! Jesus points out that the scribes have got their logic all wrong and then offers a different account of what's going on by talking about the “stronger

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:7.

<sup>7</sup> This may surprise some Christians: The Bible doesn't tell us the origin of evil!

<sup>8</sup> William Barclay says: The medical profession and (ethical) research scientists who meet the challenge of disease are sharing in the defeat of Satan as much as the preacher of the word! The doctor and the minister are not rivals but allies in God's warfare against the power of evil.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 3:23.

<sup>10</sup> For an enlightening read, see C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*.

one who is arrived.”<sup>11</sup> The only way that you can steal from a body-builder is to overpower that person and tie them up *before* you can loot their property. Jesus’ undisputed exorcisms were evidence that Jesus *was* overcoming evil with good. Jesus couldn’t possibly be in collusion with the devil, rather exorcisms proved that Satan’s defences had been breached by a stronger being.

Jesus then concludes this episode by talking about the “unforgivable sin.” He says, “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never receive forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”<sup>12</sup> Let’s explore this briefly because there are some sensitive people who have real nightmares wondering if they have perhaps committed this particular sin and therefore are eternally damned. For some it is because of some deep *secret* in their past, perhaps they had an abortion, or committed a homosexual act. Others wonder if it refers to suicide – and we have heard about that this week with the tragic deaths of Kate Spade and Tony Bourdain. What does “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” mean? First of all, we should not see the reference to the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian sense that we understand today. In other words, the sin is *not* against just one member of the Trinity, but against what *God* is doing in the world through the divine spirit.<sup>13</sup> In the context of this passage, it is to *confuse* the work of the divine spirit with a demonic spirit, reversing good and evil, and attributing the saving acts of God to the destructive power of Satan. Once a person has deliberately labeled what is the work of the Holy Spirit as a work of the devil, there really is no going back. It’s not that God is desperately angry with this one sin in particular; rather this scenario describes a genuine “conspiracy theory.” All the evidence that they will see will simply confirm their prior belief because they are blinded to the truth. Their eyes are so tightly closed that light is darkness for them; good has become evil. The Light *is* there for those who will accept it, but if some refuse that Light, where else can they hope to receive illumination? Another way to see this is to say that “*all* sins can be forgiven,” so long as people do not deliberately cut themselves off from the source of forgiveness, the divine spirit. The implication is that some people have cut *themselves* off from God’s forgiveness.

For those who are troubled by fear that they may have committed the “unforgivable” sin take note: First, the very fact that you are *concerned* means that you *cannot* be guilty of the obstinate rejection of God’s Holy Spirit. Only those who set themselves *against* forgiveness are excluded from it. Second, do not focus on the warning of verse 29 without receiving the *good* news of verse 28, in which Jesus affirms that for *every* other kind of sin forgiveness is available to those want it. And, therefore, be at peace.

Mark ends the scene with a strange reference to Christ’s family, who are clearly not disciples and are perhaps hostile to Jesus too. Mark therefore presents two groups of people, Christ’s own family and the expert teachers of the law from Jerusalem, who were both blind to his true identity and he brackets the two groups together in the context of a home.<sup>14</sup> Jesus is told his family are waiting

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 3:27 (and 1:7).

<sup>12</sup> Mark 3:29.

<sup>13</sup> This is a Hebrew (Old Testament) view of the divine spirit.

<sup>14</sup> Remember, Mark has no birth narrative or any prior mention of Jesus’ family life or childhood.

outside to greet him. He responds: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who were sitting around him in a circle, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For *whoever does the will of God* is my brother and sister and mother.”<sup>15</sup>

For many Westerners, Jesus’ words against his family are mildly shocking, but don’t mean all that much. We grow up with a circle of friends whom we know much better, and who we often spend *more* time with than our parents and siblings. And we regard that as normal. After all, one’s family members can be spread all over the country, or indeed all over the continent, or the wider world. But in Jesus’ world, his comments were scandalous. The family bond was tight and long-lasting. It was normal for children to live close to their parents, maybe even in the same house. The family unit would often be a business unit as well, and so their livelihoods were interconnected. Loyalty to the family was just as important as loyalty to the Sabbath; it was a feature of their identity. Jesus concludes: “Whoever does the will of God is family.” He does not define what that means, Mark’s gospel will elucidate that point, but being a disciple is certainly a matter of *doing* what the master is doing. Later, and also in the context of exorcism, Mark tells us Jesus said, “Whoever is not against us is for us.”<sup>16</sup> The way Mark presents it allows for no middle ground. Consequently, Jesus isn’t just a mildly interesting historical figure, as many today would like him to be. In fact, that is just another convenient label to neutralize Jesus and keep him at arm’s distance. What Jesus is saying is that the kingdom of God calls for a radical decision; nothing can have a higher priority - not even family. This, then, sets an extraordinary scene in that it may be necessary to forsake one’s biological family, one’s closest ties in the world, in order to be a disciple of Jesus. This may have already happened to some in Mark’s community, where families may have shunned and cut off Jesus-followers from the family inheritance - and this still happens today.

What are we to make of all this? I conclude with a few short points:

First, if we get side-tracked by the mere notion of demon-possession, we have missed the point. Evil is real, but God is stronger.

Second, don’t confuse good with evil. Seek discernment; keep your eyes wide open. Name evil as “evil,” and not just as a “difference of opinion” – which is something we hear too often these days. The world needs such clarity, whether that is racism, materialism, or one of the many other “isms.”

Third, if we always come to the source of forgiveness – to God, as revealed in Jesus Christ – there is *never* any reason to fear.

Finally, are we doing what God wants, even when it is unpopular with those we love? The cost of following Jesus can be very high, but the cost of refusing God’s forgiveness is even higher. Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark 3:33-35. Note: the word “brothers” is generic and means “brothers *and* sisters.” Since there is no mention of Jesus father, it is usually assumed he had died earlier.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 9:40.