

One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. I say mad scientist, you say eccentric inventor. I say statesman, you say demagogue. I say thug, you say revolutionary. Whether we're talking about John Cage or Jackson Pollock in the arts, Che Guevara or Abraham Lincoln in politics, Nikola Tesla or Charles Darwin in science and technology, we can come to wildly different estimations of well-known people, sometimes at completely opposite ends of the spectrum.

That's what happens to Jesus in today's text. Demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God, His family thinks that He's out of His mind, and a group of Pharisees from Jerusalem claim that He's either demon-possessed or in league with the prince of demons. Jesus is the ultimate *polarizing* figure; He won't let you come to any vanilla verdict about His identity. It's all or nothing. Either Jesus is the Son of God or He is a demonic lunatic. Which is it?

And not only do you have to make a decision about *His* identity; but His mission might even cause you to rethink everything you know about your own. Remember Paul in Philippians, recounting his life story? I'm an Israelite, a Hebrew of Hebrews, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, and so on. And yet he counts all of that as rubbish compared to knowing Christ and being found in Him. And that's what today's text drives us to do: to know Christ for who He is, and to find our identity in Him as a member of the new Israel, the new family of God.

Because in Mark 3, Jesus redefines two of the most fundamental realities of Jewish life by establishing a *new Israel* and a *new family*. When He calls a new twelve, He is *remaking* the people of God. Jesus' version of Israel is no longer based on the twelve tribes of Jacob's twelve sons; it is made up of those who follow Jesus and His twelve apostles. Jesus is claiming to be greater than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, more important when it comes to identifying God's people: true sons of Abraham are apostolic Christians. And so as Jesus' ministry unfolds, we will see more and more conflict and controversy over just who the true sons of Abraham really are, and who the real Israel is, because of what He does here by appointing the Twelve to be His official representatives, extensions of Jesus Himself who preach and cast out demons in His name, and who form the foundation of the new people of God.

The second fundamental reality that Jesus changes here in chapter three is that of *family*. In the midst of the overwhelming pressure of ministry, Jesus' family conclude that he has gone insane, and so they come to collect him, really to seize him – the verb is a strong one. V. 21 forms the first part of one of Mark's "sandwiches", where he splits a story in half and stuffs another story in the middle. The first piece of bread, v. 21, tells us the intentions of His family, and the other slice comes in verses 31-35, surrounding a major controversy over Jesus' source of power.

Through these interactions with his mother and brothers, (presumably, Joseph is dead, and it's possible, in light of v.35, that there was a sister or sisters there too), but through these interactions, Jesus reveals that the arrival of God's kingdom has changed what family means.

In our era of broken families, we can miss the absolute shock of Jesus' actions. Family was *everything* in the ancient world, especially for the Jews. The command to honor father and mother was central to Jewish identity, as was the ability to trace your ancestry back to Abraham. This is what made you *you*! And Jesus is overthrowing that, changing it, redefining it. What makes a family, according to Jesus, is not biology or parentage, but submitting to God the Father, and doing His will. And if your biological family starts to get in the way of God's kingdom work, then honoring your Father means hating your earthly family and following Jesus instead.

Following Jesus changes you. It makes you a different person by redefining your parentage and family and social history. This is a big part of what it means to be born again, re-generated. This is why we need to know who Jesus is first: being found in Him might cause us to lose everything else. Knowing who Jesus is changes who you are. If he's out of His mind, then don't join His new Israel. If He has a demon, don't become part of His family!

The scribes who come down from Jerusalem have to give an account of Jesus. They need to decide how they are going to explain His popularity, His miracles, His message. He's living by different rules than the Pharisees. He's doing things that only God can do. And He's just established a rival people of God, a new Israel within Israel. And this isn't the crank with 27 subscribers to his newsletter or 32 followers on Twitter. He's attracting people from all over Palestine! (vv.7-8) They can't ignore Him or dismiss Him. He's made too much of an impact. He's too powerful for that. They cannot for Jesus without resorting to the supernatural.

And so they claim that He has an unclean spirit, and that His ministry is demonic. The power and authority that He wields comes from Beelzebul, the prince of demons. And if this is true, then it's clear which Israel you need to be a part of. It's clear which family deserves your honor. If you agree with the Scribes, then you must oppose Jesus root and branch, and do everything you can to bring His kingdom down.

But Jesus responds to them just like He responded to the local scribes – He exposes their folly with a parable, and points to the true explanation of His ministry. If Satan is punching himself in the face, why would you come all the way across the country to stop him doing that? Wouldn't it be better to let him knock himself out? If they really believe what they are saying, then they are opposing someone who is tearing Satan's kingdom apart! Whose side are they on?

And it's very interesting that in vv. 24-25 Jesus doesn't specify which kingdom or whose house He's talking about. In the immediate context, he's talking about Satan's kingdom, but if you zoom out, you can see that Jesus is implicating the scribes. If He really is plundering Satan's kingdom and bringing in God's Kingdom, and the scribes rise up to oppose Him, then *God's house* is also divided, and the Scribes are opposing God's kingdom! Jesus is reversing the charges on them: either *His ministry* or *their opposition* is undermining God's kingdom. Which is it? Well, who is visibly and actively doing damage to Satan's kingdom? Who is healing and casting out demons?

But then Jesus does something more than He did with the scribes and Pharisees in ch. 2. He's refuted them time and time again with parables, but here He uses straightforward language to deliver one of the most terrifying warnings in all of Scripture. Vv. 28-30 deal with what has been called "the Unforgivable Sin", the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit by ascribing His work to the Devil. This is the ultimate form of calling good evil, and Jesus calls it an *eternal sin*.

Now, if you are personally concerned that you have committed serious sins against God, and have a hard time believing you can be forgiven, then verse 28 is for you. *All sins will be forgiven the children of man*. That's good news, and that's a precious part of the gospel that Jesus came to announce. But if you look at Jesus and His work, and conclude that He is demon-possessed, and that His ministry of preaching and healing and giving life and rest and blessing to mankind is the work of the devil, then there is no hope of salvation for you. If your considered opinion of Jesus is that He is serving Satan, then you will never be forgiven.

Now, two things to note: first, I do not think that Jesus is referring to a moment in time thought – Saul the Pharisee came to exactly that conclusion, but later repented and was forgiven. Instead, what Jesus means has more to do with the outworking of the history of redemption and the nature of the Spirit's ministry than to a mistaken conclusion about Jesus that you later repent of and reject.

What does that mean? By redemptive history, I simply mean this: God the Father had spoken to His people, and many of them rebelled. In His mercy, He sent Jesus to renew the Covenant, and many Israelites repented and were restored by believing in Jesus. Many, but not all. But finally, God sent the Spirit at Pentecost to convict people of sin and to testify to the truth about Jesus. And if after all that, you still don't believe, what more is God going to do? Who else will He send? No one else is coming! If you reject the Spirit, you'll get no more help from God.

And the other aspect that makes the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit eternal and unforgiveable is the nature of the Spirit's work. Think of all the sicknesses and illnesses in the

world, and imagine that there was one medicine that could cure them all. This means that the only way to die of disease is to *reject* the medicine. But if you believe that the medicine is actually poison, that's exactly what you'll do. That's what's so serious about blaspheming the Holy Spirit. It's not the fact that you are sick that is the ultimate problem; it's the fact that you reject the only cure. That's what makes your condition incurable. If you ascribe Jesus' Spirit-filled ministry to the Devil, you are rejecting the very ministry that leads to forgiveness and life.

And so as we close today, I want you to examine your own life in light of this gospel word. Who are you? What defines you? What gives shape to your life? Are you American? Are you middle class? Are you white or black, democrat or republican? Or are you an Apostolic Christian, someone who has learned from the Apostles of Jesus what it means to follow Him? There isn't always constant conflict between these competing identities, but there is always tension. Following Jesus first means these other aspects of your identity have to bow to Him as Lord.

So who is your family? What does it mean to honor God the Father and the Church your Mother even more than your own flesh and blood parents? Praise God when your biological family is also part of God's family, but don't be surprised when you have to make difficult decisions: you could give a tithe, or you could afford to attend the family wedding. You could move closer to family, but farther from a good church. You could sign your child up for sports or music or other events, or you could put a priority on the Sabbath. You could raise the standard of living in your home, or you could sponsor a child overseas. These decisions become easier when you hear that by doing the will of God, Jesus considers you to be a part of His family.

These questions about who you are are important, but they can only be answered if you have first heard what the gospel says about who Jesus is. Is He out of His mind? Is He demon-possessed? Or is He the Son of God? If Jesus is the Son of God, then you know what you need to do. You need to submit your identity to Him, and allow Him to remake you in His image as one of His people. You need to see yourself first and foremost as a Christian, a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. You need to be willing to ignore your mother and brothers when they call you away from following Jesus, and you need to see each and every person baptized in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as your brother and sister and mother.

Everything about you, everything that makes you who you are, needs to be submitted to the will of God, to His kingdom purposes. That's what it means to follow Jesus as His disciple. And when you do that, Jesus gives you the power to overcome sin and Satan in His name. So may God strengthen us to listen to Jesus and to do His Will.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*