

## “Binding the Strong Man, the Eternal Sin, and the True Family of Jesus”

Mark 3:20-25

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Today’s gospel lesson is difficult. We’ve got Jesus, and his family; some scribes from Jerusalem, and a crowd of people sitting around Jesus. We’ve got references to Beelzebul, demons, Satan, and the Holy Spirit. Perplexing things are coming from the mouth of Jesus. Binding the strong man. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The true family of Jesus. Let’s see if we can make some sense of it all.

“The crowd came together again, so they could not even eat.” Clearly Jesus was very popular, reaching the hearts and minds of many common people, who were eager to listen to what he had to say. But that popularity came with a cost. His family members are concerned about him. Mark says, “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” Some of what Jesus was saying and doing went *so much* against the norm and against conventional wisdom and understanding, that some people think he’s crazy. Like, literally, *insane*. His family members have heard these reports, and are so concerned that they decide they need to *stop* him.

Now, pause a second. Who were the family members of Jesus? There’s Mary, his mother. There was his stepfather Joseph, who raised him, although Joseph is not mentioned after Jesus has grown up. He may have died before Jesus began his ministry. The New Testament also indicates that Jesus had at least four “brothers,” and an unknown number of “sisters.” Two of those “brothers” became very important later on; one of them – James – became the leader of the church in Jerusalem; another one – Judas or “Jude” – may have written the letter of Jude in the New Testament. The other two were Joseph (or Joses) and Simon. These four men (or possibly more), and at least two women, are collectively called “the brothers and sisters of Jesus.” Some people think they were younger half-siblings of Jesus, born to Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus. Other people think that Joseph had been married and had children prior to his engagement to Mary, and that his first wife had died. Still others think the words “brothers and sisters” are a metaphorical way of referring to cousins. The Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and a few other branches of the Christian family hold to a doctrine called “the perpetual virginity of Mary,” which claims that Mary never engaged in sexual relations at any point in her life, and that the only child she ever bore was Jesus. We don’t really have enough information to know which of these interpretations is correct. All we know is that the gospels clearly make reference to “the brothers and sisters of Jesus,” and mentions four brothers by name.

And at this point in the gospel story, these relatives of Jesus are *very* concerned about him.

They are not alone. Scribes from Jerusalem also think that Jesus is out of his right mind. They attribute it to a demon. “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.” Who was Beelzebul? Beelzebul is only mentioned the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In some manuscripts

the name is “Beelzebub,” which is similar to “Baal-zebul,” which shows up in the Old Testament as a mocking reference to the god of Ekron, one of the cities of the Philistines; literally, it means “Lord of the Flies.” Christians through the centuries have traditionally understood Beelzebul to be a fallen angel who was swept out of heaven when he rebelled against God. Some see him as one of the lieutenants of Satan; others understand Beelzebul to be simply another name for Satan. The wording here in Mark’s gospel makes it sound like Beelzebul and Satan are synonymous. Beelzebul is “the ruler of demons.”

Now I know that some of you would rather have a version of Christianity that didn’t have any demons in it. That is not the world that the New Testament describes. The New Testament clearly refers, in almost every book, to the spiritual forces of darkness, the “powers and principalities” that have some sway over this fallen world. We talk all the time about Christ’s remarkable birth, his miraculous deeds of power, his resurrection and ascension, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. If you can accept all that, at least to some extent, would you be willing to consider accepting demons as well?

The scribes who have come down from Jerusalem agree with Jesus’ family that Jesus has gone out of his mind. But they go further; they believe he has been possessed by a demon, and that it is because he has been possessed by a demon that he is able to cast out demons from other people. Jesus challenges the scribes: “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.” Abraham Lincoln famously quoted that verse in his 1858 “House Divided” speech, talking about the divided condition of the United States, but let’s stay focused on the argument Jesus is making. What Jesus is saying is that it is inherently impossible for someone who is possessed by a demon to cast out demons. For that would mean that the forces of darkness would be working against themselves, effectively working for *good*, the very opposite of their nature. That would simply be impossible.

The answer, Jesus says, is this: “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.” That’s very cryptic; what does it mean? Simply put, what Jesus is saying is this: a “strong man” – Satan, Beelzebul, whatever you want to call the forces of darkness – has built up a “house” in the lives of some people. People who have been possessed by demons; people whom Jesus is liberating. When Jesus encounters these people and casts out the demons, he is “entering” the “house” of the “strong man” and “plundering the strong man’s property.” Jesus is *cleansing* those houses, restoring them to their *rightful* order, their *rightful owner*. But how is Jesus able to do this? How is it that Jesus can do these exorcisms which the ordinary person cannot? Because Jesus has “first tied up the strong man.” Jesus has spiritual powers which are *greater* than the powers of the forces of darkness. Remember how John the Baptist had said that Jesus would be “more powerful” than he was? (Mark 1:7) What he meant was, more *spiritually* powerful. *Stronger*, in a spiritual sense. Strong enough to bind the strong man. Strong enough to bind *Satan*.

If that verse was hard, well, the next two verses are even harder. Jesus says: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” This is one of the hardest lines anywhere in the Bible. Jesus is saying that there is a sin for which there is *no chance of forgiveness*. Every other sin can be forgiven: murder, adultery, lying, theft; on and on it goes. But there is one sin that has *eternal* consequences: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What does Jesus mean? Well, remember the context. Some people are saying that *Jesus has been possessed by a demon*. They are looking at the absolute epitome of ultimate *goodness* and somehow perceive *evil* working in and

through him. They have it all *completely* wrong! They are oriented 180 degrees in the wrong direction! They look at Jesus and instead of seeing the *Holy Spirit*, they see an *evil* spirit. *That* is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is seeing the *good* that Jesus is doing through the Holy Spirit and calling it *evil*.

So is it truly the case that there can never be forgiveness for such a person? Well, forgiveness is built upon the foundation of *repentance*. If there is no repentance, there can be no forgiveness. If someone looks at Jesus and sees *evil* instead of *good*, how could they possibly repent? For *repentance* is grounded upon the knowledge of good and evil. These people are *completely confused* about what is good and what is evil. They can't receive forgiveness because they are not repenting. And they are not repenting because they don't believe they *need* to repent. And they don't believe they need to repent because their hearts have become *so incredibly hardened* that no one – not even Jesus! – can persuade them. They don't see the good in him; they don't trust him; they don't believe his word. They are willfully opposed to God. There is nothing anyone can do. They are *hopelessly lost*.

Now let me be clear. If you have ever wondered if *you* are guilty of this eternal sin, of this "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," the answer is, *as long as you can look at Jesus and see the Holy Spirit at work in him*, rather than the demonic forces of evil, you're *fine*. You may have sinned in other ways, but as long as you can get down on your knees and ask for forgiveness from the God we know in Jesus Christ, because you trust in his grace and mercy and goodness, you're going to be *just fine*.

This passage from Mark's gospel comes to a close with Jesus' family members gathering outside the place where Jesus is teaching the crowd that is seated around him. Those family members do not think that Jesus is possessed by a demon. But they also don't believe that he's in his right mind. They have not yet perceived what they will later perceive; they have not yet come to *faith* in him. That will come. As the New Testament story continues, it becomes very clear that *at least* James, and Jude if it's the same Jude, become devout believers and leaders in the church. But that comes later. Even Mary, the mother of Jesus, seems to be concerned about her son in this story; perhaps she has been listening to the voices of his brothers and sisters a bit too much; or perhaps she's coming along not because she truly believes the lies that are being told about Jesus, but just because she's concerned about her son.

Jesus is told: "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." Jesus responds: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He looks around at the crowd. "*Here* are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

It's not a rejection of his family. Don't interpret this to mean that he doesn't *love* his mother and sisters and brothers. He loves them, a very great deal. But he's also saying that, in the end, there's something more important than family. Or, rather, he's *re-defining what "family" means*.

Your family is important. Your relatives, the people that you love, the ones who raised you and who were raised with you – those bonds are very important, and special. But there's something even *more* important, something even *more* special – namely, your relationship to *Jesus*, your Savior and Lord. All of us who belong to Christ belong not just to the families of our birth, but also – and more importantly – the family of our *re-birth*. We become brothers and sisters with one another – a deeper, more lasting, and frankly more *eternal* bond than the bond we have with our relatives. I hope none of us ever have to *choose* between these two families. But if we do, there is only one *right* choice.

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