

## “He Has Beelzebul...”

Genesis 3:8-15 • Psalm 130 • 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 • Mark 3:20-35

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Who is Jesus? Is he – or is he not – from *God*? That’s the question at the heart of today’s Gospel passage. It’s not an academic question. It’s a very personal, very *real* question. Who is Jesus, *really*?

The story begins with Jesus going “home.” I think that refers to his home base in the fishing village of Capernaum, at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee, not the village of Nazareth where he grew up, farther to the west and south. A lot of Jesus’ early ministry took place in and around Capernaum. He must have had a home base there; he must have stayed *somewhere* in or near that town. He has been healing people, teaching people, casting out demons, and commissioning his twelve chosen apostles. Now “he went home,” to wherever he was staying. But he did not go home alone! “The crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.” There is a massive throng of people at Jesus’s doorstep. They want *more*. They want more teachings; more healing; more of his *power*.

“When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” His family members don’t arrive until ten verses later. I think they heard about what Jesus was doing, and the controversy it was causing, and what people were saying about him, and so they *set out* from wherever they were – perhaps Nazareth – to come find him. To come *restrain* him. Apparently, they were believing the reports about him, that “he has gone out of his mind.” Maybe they thought he had gone stark raving mad. So they leave wherever they are, and *set out* to find Jesus.

Who are these family members who are setting out to find Jesus? Verse 31 mentions “his mother and his brothers.” His mother, of course, is Mary. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Mark gives us the names of four brothers of Jesus, “James and Joses and Judas and Simon.” Matthew repeats those names, in a different order, and with one slight variation: “James and Joseph and Simon and Judas.” “Joses” and “Joseph” appear to be the same person. Mark and Matthew also mention that Jesus had “sisters,” plural, meaning that there are at least two of them, but we aren’t told their names. Jesus’s father is nowhere in sight; it is generally believed that he must have passed away sometime in Jesus’s teens or twenties.

But are these really *brothers and sisters* of Jesus, in a biological sense? The Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and some other branches of Christianity teach a doctrine called the “perpetual virginity of Mary,” the idea that Mary was *always* a virgin, before, during, and after the birth of Christ. That notion can be traced back to an early Christian writing called the Protoevangelium (or Proto-Gospel) of James, which is an expanded re-telling of the events that led up to the birth of Jesus. But there’s nothing in the New Testament itself that states that Mary remained a virgin *after* Jesus was born; the New Testament only says that she was a virgin *before* Jesus was born. Therefore many Protestant Christians do not subscribe to this doctrine, and affirm that after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

married and had *at least six* more children: those four sons – James, Joses (or Joseph), Judas, and Simon – and at least two daughters. Christians who affirm the perpetual virginity of Mary say that those people were either children of Joseph from a previous marriage (which would make them Jesus’s step-siblings), or cousins of Jesus, perhaps children of Mary’s sister, or children of Joseph’s brother.

However exactly these people were related to Jesus, we don’t know a great deal about most of them. The ones we *do* know something about are Judas, who is traditionally believed to have written the short “epistle of Jude” in the New Testament, and James, who – after Pentecost – became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. So it would appear that at least *two* of these people eventually became followers of Jesus after his death, resurrection, and ascension, but at *this* point in the story, *none* of them seem to believe in him. They hear the reports about him, and they “went out to restrain him.”

Before they arrive, a very serious accusation is made against Jesus: “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’” The “scribes” were people who were well-trained in the Jewish Law, the Law of Moses; they could interpret it and teach it; they knew how to examine and explain its finer points, sometimes adding their own teachings and interpretations that weren’t explicit in the biblical text. These scribes have been hovering around Jesus for a while now, watching him perform healings, eat with “sinners” and tax collectors, and teach things they considered blasphemous. The problem for them is, *everyone in the village has been seeing Jesus perform healings*. He clearly has *miraculous power*. Everyone can see that, as plain as day. The question is, *whose* power does he have? *God’s* power? If they say that he has power that comes from *God*, then how can they challenge his *teachings*? They are faced with the dilemma that C.S. Lewis raised in his classic book *Mere Christianity*: “You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.” These scribes do *not* believe he is the Son of God; they are not *about* to fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. That leaves them only a couple options. Some people are saying “He has gone out of his mind” – he’s a madman. The scribes go the next step. He’s not just *mad*. He’s *demon-possessed*. He’s got *Beelzebul!*

Who’s Beelzebul? One of the gods of the Philistines, the arch-enemies of the ancient Israelites, was named Baal-zebub. He’s mentioned four times in the first chapter of 2 Kings. That’s not quite the same name, but it’s very close. There’s some debate among the scholars, but it appears that the name “Baal-zebub” means “Lord of the Flies” – like the title of the 1954 book about a group of boys stranded on an island who descend into depravity. The name *Beelzebul*, with an “l” at the end, seems to either be a variant form of that same name, or it might be a derogatory slang name for that Philistine god, made up of two Hebrew words: the word “baal,” which means “god;” and the word “zebel,” which means “dung” or “excrement.” In that interpretation, “Beelzebul” means “god of the dung,” or “god of” – well, fill in the blank! So when the scribes say that Jesus has “Beelzebul,” they’re basically saying, he’s full of \_\_\_\_! (You know, there are some words I just can’t say in a sermon, but sometimes it sure is tempting!)

This was a very serious charge. “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.” They are saying the authority of Jesus isn’t *divine*. It’s *demonic*. So Jesus challenges them to explain: “How can Satan cast out Satan?” For that is what they are saying. That Satan, the ultimate adversary to all that is good and holy, the force that compelled Adam and Eve to lie to God and to cast blame on others for their own sins, the malevolent force that has wreaked evil and suffering and death

upon humanity ever since, is responsible for *bringing people back to their right minds*. That's what Jesus has been doing, healing people and casting out demons; he's *bringing people back to their right minds*, the way God *intended* them to be. Is that really something that *Satan* would do? No. Of course not.

Jesus explains: "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. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come." Jesus is saying, *none of that* is what's happening here. It's not *Satan* that is bringing about the downfall of Satan's reign. Jesus continues: "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." This is important. This is *very* important. It's a metaphor for what Jesus is up to. "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property" – that's what Jesus is doing; he's entered the *Strong Man's* house – *Satan's* house – and is *plundering his property* by his words and deeds, undoing the terrible *damage* that Satan has done. "No one" can do this, says Jesus, "without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered." *This* is what Jesus is doing. He's *tying up the Strong Man*. He's *binding Satan*. Bringing Satan's evil *tyranny* to an end.

The scribes say Jesus is possessed by the devil. They say he has an unclean spirit. Do they really *believe* that, are they are just saying that because they're *afraid* of losing their *power* and their *authority*? Whatever the reason, they couldn't be farther from the truth. Jesus is most definitely *of God*. He is decisively *wielding God's power* to undermine Satan's *bind*, Satan's *grip*, Satan's *hold*, on humanity. The scribes are *fundamentally wrong*. They have committed the *worst* of all possible sins: denying the power of the Holy Spirit that is within Jesus. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "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." I think, deep down, the scribes *really knew* the truth, and they were unwilling to *admit* it. They were *lying* to people about *God*. And that was *unforgivable*.

"Then his mother and his brothers came." Finally, Jesus's family shows up. Remember, they have come to restrain him. At this point, they *do not yet believe* in him. "Standing outside they sent to him and called him." But Jesus is busy. "A crowd was sitting around him." He's teaching them. He's telling them about the Kingdom. He's telling them the *truth* about God. That's important work! It shouldn't be interrupted. But here's his family! They don't get it. Not yet. People near him tell him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you." He replies: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Who's the *real* family of Jesus? Is it the people who are related to him by *blood*? Or the people who are *devoted to his word*? "Looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" On the surface, that may sound cruel. It's really not. Our families are important. They're *very* important. But there's something more important than even the *best* of families. His name is *Jesus*. He's *of God*!

Ultimately, at least *some* members of Jesus's family are going to come around. Eventually, some of them will *get it*. They're going to see the truth of who Jesus *really* is, the truth that the people sitting around Jesus *already* see. They're not there yet, but they *will* be. One day, they'll be members of his family, in *blood*, and, more importantly, in *Spirit* and in *truth*. One day, they will truly *understand*.

May it be so with all of *our* relatives, all those we love who do not yet *see* what we see. *May it be!*

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