

Jesus' New World Order

Message 5

The New World Family

Mark 3:13-35

Extreme Behavior

What is the worst thing you have done since coming to Lehigh? What would your parents do if they found out? Would they be disappointed? Outraged? Threaten not to let you come back next semester? What would it take, what terrible thing would you have to do to push them to the breaking point – where they would do something extreme – like kidnap you? You do not hear about it so much anymore, but several years ago you would occasionally hear about a family who hired someone to kidnap their child. This would happen when he or she got involved in some cult group that swallowed up the life of anyone who joined. These groups would exert such control over their members' minds and life that they were essentially brainwashed. After seizing their child from such a group, the parents would then hire a professional to deprogram him. Wild, isn't it?

Tonight we see Jesus' family attempting to do just this. They have come to the conclusion that Jesus has blown a fuse. He has gone from being a great teacher to being a dangerous cult leader – and they have to rescue Him. They have to rescue Him from Himself – before some disaster brings His life to a bloody end. Now what in the world could Jesus have done to provoke such a radical effort by His family? Surely it could not be the preaching and healing that has characterized His ministry. And even casting out demons, although amazing, seems to have been accepted by people as a legitimate act of a great prophet. The verse we are considering is verse 21. Some people look at the preceding verse and think that Jesus' family was worried about Him because He was too busy. Of course this is something people worry about, but it does not make sense that this would cause them to resort to kidnaping. So what did Jesus do that no teacher or prophet had ever done before? What was so dangerous it warranted kidnaping?

Cause for Kidnaping

This question cannot be answered until we review the context. Let's reflect back on Mark's gospel so far. Jesus began His ministry with an announcement. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Then Jesus called – hand picked – His disciples. He began preaching, and as He preached, He healed the sick and cast demons out of those who were possessed. So far He was widely accepted as the greatest prophet anyone had ever known. Then Jesus raised eyebrows by forgiving the sins of a paralyzed man. This was something only God could do. So was Jesus a blasphemer? But remember, He did heal the paralyzed man. Next Jesus claimed to be the bridegroom. This is a pregnant Old Testament metaphor for God. He also implied that His teaching would destroy the old ways of serving God. Finally, He broke the Sabbath customs. In the eyes of the religious leaders this was the worst offense. They had instituted these laws, and these laws represented the religious power of the leaders. They immediately made an alliance with their hated enemies the Herodians to kill Jesus.

Does this seem like reason enough to be concerned for Jesus' welfare? If you were Jesus' mother, and there was a price on your son's head, what would you do? But then there is the incident of appointing the twelve. It is easy for us to miss the stunning implications of this act. Jesus went up on a mountain. This was not because He liked the outdoors or wanted a break from the sea. Mountains in the Bible are where men meet God. Moses met God at Mount Sinai, and later he received the Ten Commandments there. Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. The temple was built on a mountain. All through the scripture you see God meeting men on mountains. Now Jesus meets twelve men on a mountain. And for the Jews, the number twelve sizzled with meaning. It was the twelve sons of Jacob who formed the nation of Israel – and ever since, Israel had been conceived as consisting of twelve tribes. So Jesus met twelve men

on a mountain and gave them authority to carry on His ministry. Now do you see the radical significance of Jesus' act? By giving divine authority to twelve men, He is constituting a new Israel. Jesus has committed treason.

Who Is Jesus?

Who is Jesus? This is the most important question of all time. Was Jesus a great teacher? Was He a prophet of similar stature with Moses? Was He a radical who led the poor and oppressed in a revolution against their oppressors? Was He a man with an unusually powerful divine spark in Him? All these and other ideas have been proposed. Or was Jesus who Mark proclaims Him to be – the Son of God? If Jesus was one of the above, some of His actions are hard to defend. If He were simply a man, what would give Him the right to forgive sins? Or refuse to obey the laws of legitimate authorities? Or set up a shadow government? But if Jesus is God, then He has the right to all these. If Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, if Jesus legitimately possesses divine authority, if Jesus really is God, then He has the right to establish His Kingdom on earth. And that is what He claimed from the beginning when He said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." If Jesus is the Messiah, if He is God, then He is not committing treason. In fact anyone who opposes Him is guilty of rebellion.

Every generation has people who claim to admire Jesus and follow His teachings, but without believing He is the Son of God. Even an imam of a mosque in Philadelphia recently told his congregation to read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He said it would teach them good morals. But the same Jesus who taught to turn the other cheek also overthrew the Jewish leadership and substituted His own followers as the leaders of a new, reconstituted Israel. The same Jesus who insisted on telling the simple truth claimed divine authority. The great Christian author C. S. Lewis put it this way. You have only three choices. Jesus is either a liar, or a lunatic, or Lord. He claimed to be God. If He is not, then He is a blatant liar or a raving lunatic. What is absolutely impossible is that Jesus might be a great teacher without being God.

But in every generation people insist on admiring the teaching of Jesus while refusing to believe in Him as the Son of God. Since this is a ridiculous position, why do people continue to insist on holding it? Because for them the consequences of following Jesus are unbearable. To follow Jesus means to accept that He really is the Lord of all – including your own life. This is the catch. If Jesus is God, He has the right to claim your allegiance. This was the problem for Jesus' family and the religious leaders. They appreciated Jesus' teaching and healing, but were unprepared to follow Him as Master and Lord. So as Jesus continued establishing His new Kingdom, they began to oppose Him.

Prince of Demons?

The next paragraph is a long one. It begins with verse 20 and continues to the end of the chapter. It opens with Jesus' family coming to seize Him. This story is interrupted to insert the story of Jesus' encounter with the scribes from Jerusalem. Then at the end the story of Jesus' family is concluded. Each of these stories could have been told as a discrete unit, but Mark weaves them together here because they both make the same point: if you are not for Jesus, you are against Him.

The Jewish leaders knew they could not simply kill Jesus in broad daylight. He was so popular with the crowds, they would have killed an assassin right away. And when word got out that the leaders had been behind the plot, they likely would have suffered the same fate. Furthermore, the Jews lived in the shadow of Rome. Any major social disturbance would have brought in the Roman legions, and the Jews would have been cast out of power. So before Jesus could be killed, He had to be discredited in the eyes of the people. For this task the big guns from Jerusalem were brought to dusty Galilee.

No one could deny that Jesus had performed great miracles. Obviously there was a great power at

work in Him. The Jerusalem scribes used the tactic of ascribing this power to Beelzebul. This is an Aramaic word which means “lord of the flies,” and is used as a name for the prince of the demons – Satan, in other words. If the people believed that Satan was the source of Jesus’ power – or even if they considered it plausible – they would avoid Him like the plague. No matter how much you suffer with disease, even that is better than tangling with Satan. But Jesus effortlessly turned aside this accusation by pointing out that Satan would never cast out his own allies – the demons. Here you see the origin of Abraham Lincoln’s famous phrase, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Jesus continues, “no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man.” (Mark 3:27) Here Jesus not only claims to be stronger than Satan, He also claims to have bound him – a point expanded in the book of Revelation.

The Unforgivable Sin

The next three verses have occasionally caused distress, because they mention a sin so wicked that it can never be forgiven. More than one person has looked into his heart and wondered, have I committed this sin? Am I beyond forgiveness? Is there no hope for me? Is even Jesus unable to save me from my sins?

The specific sin in question is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus explicitly states that all manner of sin – sexual sins, no matter how perverted; murder, no matter how grisly; theft, even of grandmothers’ savings; slander, no matter how vile – even vicious slander against God can be forgiven. But this one sin, and only this one, can never be forgiven. So the urgent question is, what exactly is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

Blasphemy is a particular case of slander. It is slander or insult against a deity. So at first we might think that Jesus means speaking rudely of the Holy Spirit. But it is hard to imagine how or why such a thing might happen. But Mark explains the meaning of this sin in the next verse: “for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” Remember back in chapter one that Jesus’ ministry was launched by His baptism. When Jesus was baptized by John, heaven opened and the Spirit came down upon Him. So in some way Jesus has been accompanied by the Holy Spirit as He does His ministry. All that Jesus did was in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus and the Spirit worked together to preach and heal and cast out demons. Now scribes from Jerusalem, the top religious experts, come to check out Jesus. This is no barroom banter. This is not the talk of drunken sailors. This is the verdict of serious scholars of scripture. And their verdict is that the spirit of Jesus is evil. Obviously, if this is their opinion, they will steer clear of Jesus. They will never consider believing Him or following His teaching. To do so would be the same as serving Satan. Now, forgiveness of sins is possible only through Jesus, and if you always avoid Jesus – clearly you will never be forgiven.

The critical point here is that Jesus is not so much rendering harsh judgment against the scribes. Rather, He is warning them to reconsider their verdict. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is coming to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is evil. It is deciding that the Spirit in Jesus is unholy. Certainly this is slanderous. But more to the point, it will isolate you from the only source of salvation. If you conclude that the spirit of Jesus is unholy, you will never come to Him to be forgiven of your sins. So blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is more like a self-judgment. It is an act which drives you away from Jesus. It is like deciding that food will poison you. If this is your opinion, you will die of starvation. As long as that is your conviction, there is nothing anyone can do to save you. You will inevitably die.

But if you consider that Jesus is empowered by God, you will continue to listen to Him. As long as you are still listening there is still hope for you. And this is the intent of Jesus’ words to the scribes. It is essentially a warning. Is the spirit of Jesus unholy? Do not go there! That is a dead-end conclusion. Perhaps you do not buy that Jesus has divine powers. Perhaps you disagree with His teaching. Perhaps you are opposed to His plan to set up a new Israel. Perhaps you even conclude that He has to die for the good of your

nation. Just keep listening. Because if you shut Jesus out permanently and for good – you are doomed.

Who is Your Family?

Verse 20 tells us that this whole scene happens “at home.” Chapter 2, verse 1 indicates that home is now in Capernaum. It seems likely that Jesus has made Simon Peter’s house his home base. And now His family finally finds Him and calls Jesus to come out. This seems like a harmless act, but it is packed with meaning. Until now Jesus has always been the one doing the calling. In chapter 2 we saw Jesus call the disciples to follow Him, and in 3:13 we saw Him call them up to the mountain. Jesus is the one with authority to call. Now His family has usurped that authority to themselves. To put it another way, Jesus has the authority to decide what to do. His mother and brothers have no place to tell Him to come out. Furthermore, Mark has been setting up an inside-outside symbol. The friends of the paralyzed man sought to get inside the house where Jesus was. Then Jesus was inside with Levi and his friends, while the scribes were outside criticizing Him. And now Jesus is inside with His followers, and His family is outside.

Now Jesus again does something unheard of – He denies His family. You would not do this. Even if you were angry with your parents and siblings, you would not refuse their visit. If they called you would not say, “Who are my mother and brothers?” Why does Jesus do something so dreadful? Because His family have become His enemies. They are just like the scribes. They are not trying to kill Him, but they have an equal commitment to putting an end to His ministry. They know exactly what He is doing, and they understand the consequences. They are alarmed at His treasonous acts, and they must do all in their power to stop Him. They also have made a false judgment. They have concluded that He has no right to set up a new Israel. So like the scribes, they are opposed to Him.

But Jesus does more than deny His natural family. He redefines family relationships. This is even more radical than reconstituting Israel. Jesus says that relations in His Kingdom will be closer, more intimate, than relations within families. The key characteristic is obedience to the will of God. Everyone who obeys God will be like brothers and sisters and mothers to each other. This is good news for lonely people – people who do not have families, or whose families have abandoned or mistreated them. But it is a threat to anyone for whom family loyalty is the highest value.

By now you can see clearly that it is impossible to think that Jesus was just a great teacher. In His teaching He redefined His world, and by His actions He reordered it. Within 40 years after Jesus’ death old Israel was gone, along with its temple and religious leaders. All that was left was a new community. It was a motley group of people. They were Jewish and Greek and Roman, and every nation under the sun. They were rich and poor, educated and ignorant, noble and crude. They were found in pockets all over the Mediterranean basin. These people knew themselves to be the New Israel – the reconstructed Kingdom of God brought about by the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They gathered on the first day of the week to worship Jesus as God. They confessed Jesus as Lord, and they loved each other. They were like a family. Sometimes they even called each other brother and sister. In an empire where blood relatives exiled, poisoned, and slew each other for power and wealth, these communities welcomed as family anyone who was willing to bow the knee to Jesus. And in they came. Millions flocked into this new spiritual Kingdom, and in three centuries the most powerful empire in the world had capitulated to their claims. From the beginning Jesus had set out to establish a new world order, and He succeeded.

Questions for You

In applying this passage to ourselves today, we must ask ourselves the same questions the text has posed. First, who is Jesus? As we said earlier, the idea that Jesus is merely a great teacher does not stand up to scrutiny. Jesus is either a fraud, or He is the Son of God. Unless Jesus has perpetrated a massive deception, He has the power to heal, to forgive sins, and to overcome Satan. If Jesus is not a despicable fraud, He

is God. This means that your response to Jesus is supremely important. You have a choice, illustrated by the people in this story. Will you accept Jesus' claims and follow Him? Or will you oppose Him? Jesus is a divisive figure. He will not permit the nonsense of thinking that you can believe in Him and something else, too. Jesus will not accept partial obedience. He demands your total loyalty. Some people think this is too much to ask. They might wish to follow Jesus partly, but Jesus will not have them on those terms. In the end, their only option is to oppose Him. So which is it for you? Is He God, and will you worship Him? Or is He a fraud? Or will you believe a lie – pretending to serve Him while reserving your real loyalty for something else?

Second, who is your true family? All of you have parents, and most of you have siblings. Some of them do not worship Jesus. Some of them are strongly opposed to Jesus. Here in this room and in the church at large there are people who have given their lives to Jesus. They worship Jesus as Lord and worship God as their Father. Which people will have your first loyalty? You must choose. Now I must say in the strongest terms that neither this passage nor anything in the Bible provides an excuse for behaving disrespectfully to your parents and mistreating your siblings. The fifth commandment is still valid. Children must honor their parents. Typically for you who are dependent upon them this means obeying your parents. And many of you have parents who do believe in Jesus, so your obedience is doubly important. But all of us must recognize that loyalty to Jesus trumps loyalty to family.

The good news here is that when you decide to follow Jesus you are not left on your own. You are immediately embraced by a vast throng of other believers who will accept you as brother and sister. The church is not perfect, so there will be times when other Christians fail you. But there will always be some believers whom you can lean on – people who will care for you and love you more than your own family. If you come from a family setting where love and support is lacking, Jesus welcomes you into a true spiritual family. If your family is angry with you for believing in Jesus, you have brothers and sisters who love you. If you are ornery and obnoxious, if you have been sexually promiscuous, if you have been a drunkard or addict – Jesus has provided a family for you who will accept you and help you grow out of those sins. As in any family there will be disagreements and difficulties. But in the end, the followers of Jesus will stick with you.

This also means that you must love other believers with the same family loyalty. As you mature in Christ, you will come to see that some other believers are ignorant, prejudiced, lazy, hold unbiblical views, and still fall into sin. This is wrong, but it does not change the reality that you must accept them as your brothers and sisters. Sadly, too often Christians tend to separate into affinity groups so that they do not have to be bothered with the worst offenders in the church. So we have black churches and white churches, urban churches and suburban churches, intellectual churches and emotional churches. The greatest temptation for you as students is to seek a church which appeals to your youthful tastes – where they sing your songs and no one is over 40. The flip side is that often older congregations are unwilling to adapt to the younger generation. But all this is wrong. Some segregation will happen due to geography and culture, but for the most part, our tendency to segregate is sinful. It denies the reality that we are a spiritual family.

Jesus did not come merely to save sinners. He came to create a new world order. And a vital part of that order was a family for those sinners whom He saves. If you have been dodging the question of who Jesus is, now is the time to come clean, admit your sin, and believe in Him. For all you who believe in Jesus, He welcomes you into His family. This is the gospel.

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