

## Sermon: Choosing Sides

This is an interesting passage from our Gospel reading today. It talks about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, something that Jesus calls the unforgivable sin. If you have ever wondered what exactly the unforgivable sin is, we will talk about that in today's message.

A few times in Mark's gospel, instead of telling two stories separately, Mark will start with one, move on to the second, and then come back and finish the first one.

There are two reasons Mark does this. The first is simply a matter of style. By introducing the story but leaving it unresolved, Mark builds interest and tension until he returns to the story later to finish it off.

But the second reason is theological. Mark sees the two stories as somehow connected, and he wants us to look for the theological parallels between them.

There are times in life when you need to choose sides. Some of us don't like that. We would rather try to straddle the fence or ride down the middle of the road, but there are certain times when you must take a stand and choose your side.

Well, there is no more important instance of choosing sides than when it comes to the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

Mark gets this point across with this story of Jesus' family coming to get him and the teachers of the law accusing Jesus of siding with Satan. And though one offense is certainly more serious than the other, they are both instances of opposing Christ rather than coming over to his side. They are both examples of choosing the wrong side.

We begin with this part about Jesus' family coming to take him away.

Once again, Mark stresses Jesus' popularity here. Jesus is teaching and healing and casting out demons, and now there is such a big crowd that Jesus and his disciples are not even able to eat. Somehow Jesus' family in Nazareth hear about this, and they are determined to come and get him. It is twenty miles from Nazareth to Capernaum, so this was a full day's walk for his family.

They say that Jesus is "out of his mind." You might be surprised that Jesus' family didn't believe in him here.

This is a good reminder to us that when you follow Jesus, some people are going to think you are crazy, and it may even be members of your own family. That's when you need to remember that you have already chosen your side; you have chosen to follow Christ no matter what happens.

So, Jesus' own family says that he is out of his mind. And then they come to take charge of him. They are probably well-intentioned and only want what's best for him, but their actions also demonstrate a lack of faith in Jesus and his mission.

Mark suddenly switches gears to the story of Jesus' confrontation with the teachers of the law and will return to the story of Jesus and his family later.

Apparently, word about Jesus had gotten to Jerusalem, and so the teachers of the law make the trek out to Capernaum to investigate Christ. It was seventy miles from Jerusalem to Capernaum, so they had even farther to go than Jesus' family. And when they get there and find Jesus preaching and teaching and casting out demons and the people all gathered around him, they accuse him of two things.

First, they accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub. Now Jesus' family thought he was out of his mind, but this accusation was far worse. The word "Beelzebub" means "Lord of the Flies." It was another name for

Satan in those days, and so they were not just saying that Jesus was possessed by a demon, but by Satan himself!

And then they accuse Jesus of driving out demons by the prince of demons.

So, what are the teachers of the law doing here? They are seeking to discredit Jesus. They obviously cannot deny his ability to cast out demons. Everyone can see that. But they can cast doubt on the source of his power. The bottom line is they don't believe Jesus is from God, and yet he clearly has supernatural powers. And so, they accuse him of driving out demons by the prince of demons, Beelzebub, or Satan himself.

Jesus responds to their accusations with a series of parables.

Notice that Jesus first called them to himself. Apparently, they were making these accusations behind his back, not face to face, and so Jesus had to call them forward to address them. And when he did, he spoke to them in parables.

Jesus responds to their second accusation first – that he drives out demons by the prince of demons. Jesus asks: How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.

If Jesus is casting out demons by the power of Satan, then Satan is fighting against himself. And Jesus is telling the teachers of the law, "What you are saying doesn't make sense. How can Satan drive out Satan? A team must work together. If Satan opposes himself and is divided, then he cannot stand; his end has come."

That's Jesus' answer to the second accusation. Then he goes back to answer the first accusation – that he is possessed by Beelzebub.

In this parable Satan is the strong man. Make no mistake, Satan is a powerful, malicious being. You cannot just walk up to him and start plundering his kingdom. That's what Jesus is saying here. Jesus could not be robbing Satan's house by casting out demons unless he had overpowered and tied up Satan first. In other words, Jesus is not controlled or possessed by Satan; Satan is controlled and overpowered by Jesus! Satan is strong, but Jesus is stronger.

And then after telling them these parables, Jesus warns these teachers of the law about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

There's some good news / bad news here. The good news is that all kinds of sins and blasphemies can be forgiven. It means that no matter how badly you have sinned against God, God can still forgive you. Even the sin of blasphemy can be forgiven. Blasphemy means deliberately mocking or profaning God, so that is a very bad sin. All types of sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven. The Bible says that even blasphemy against Jesus can be forgiven!

But the bad news is, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

Here we come to the unforgivable sin – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. If all other blasphemies can be forgiven, this must be exceptionally bad to be singled out as an eternal sin that is beyond forgiveness.

What exactly is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? It is only mentioned here and in the parallel accounts of the gospels, so we need to get the context from this event.

Mark tells us that Jesus said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit." And so, it would appear that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is assigning the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life to Satan. It is the blasphemous belief that Jesus was not empowered by God through the

Holy Spirit, but that he was in fact a servant of darkness and got his power from Satan.

Such a hardening of the heart towards God's work in Christ through the Holy Spirit that you would call it the work of Satan is a blasphemy that will not be forgiven. The person who does so is guilty of an eternal sin.

Sometimes people worry that they may have committed the unforgivable sin. But I would say if you were worried about it, then you haven't done it. If you had truly blasphemed the Holy Spirit, your heart would be so completely hardened against God that you wouldn't be worrying about whether God could forgive you.

You know what's worse than committing the unforgivable sin? Committing forgivable sins but never turning to Jesus Christ for forgiveness.

The teachers of the law saw Jesus the Son of God doing good works by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they said he did it by Satan's power. In so doing, they chose their side for all of eternity.

And then finally, Mark returns to the story of Jesus and his family.

Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

Well, you would probably expect Jesus to go out and see them, but instead Jesus answers: "Who are my mother and my brothers?". Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

First Jesus asks cryptically, "Who are my mother and brothers?" Then he answers by pointing at those sitting at his feet listening to his teaching.

When you come to Christ, you become a part of his family.

Jesus is not as harsh with his family as he was with the teachers of the law. They are not blaspheming the Holy Spirit. But they are showing a lack of faith, and they are seeking to interfere with his mission.

As much as Jesus loved his family, his mission must come first. In the same way, we are to love our families, and we are to honor our parents, but God comes first. Our earthly families are temporary and only have to do with this life. But when you come to Christ, you enter a spiritual family that is forever.

Jesus' family stood outside calling him away from his mission, and Jesus had to choose sides. He chose God's side, and stayed true to his mission.

Where do you stand with God today? Where do you stand with Jesus Christ?

Whose side are you on? I pray that you will choose to stand with Christ, now and forever. Amen