

TENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (9 June 2024)

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "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. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But 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.

"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"— for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And 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." (Mark 3:20-35 – NRSV)

Introductory notes

General

This is a complex text in which Mark combines two traditions within the early community. There is clearly one tradition which reports conflict between Jesus and his own people. The other tradition concerns the charge that Jesus is working for the Evil One. The first tradition comes in two sections – 3:20-21 – and 3:31-35. The second tradition – of the claims of sorcery – is in between.

Concerning the tradition of Jesus conflicting with his own people, see also Mark 6:1-4 – "He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue.... Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him."

Matthew and Luke are clearly dependent on Mark in drawing on this tradition:

- Matthew 13:53-58 – "He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?' And they took offense at him."

- Luke 4:16–30 – “When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day ...: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me’ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

A less detailed reference is also found in John 4:44 – “When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet’s own country).”

Concerning the second tradition, Matthew and Luke – again, drawing on Mark – have their own references:

- Matthew 12:22-25 – “Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. All the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.’ He knew what they were thinking and said to them . . .”
- Luke 11:14-17 – “Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. But he knew what they were thinking and said to them . . .”

“Mark composes this pericope to integrate the themes of christology and discipleship, and locates these originally unrelated narratives at a strategic place in his gospel, after the choosing of the Twelve, which inaugurates a new section of the gospel. The first narrative, 3:20–21 and 31–35, deals with the family of Jesus. While the natural family of Jesus thinks he is unbalanced, the true family is disclosed as those who do the will of God (3:35). Sandwiched within this narrative is the more serious charge against Jesus made by the Jerusalem scribes: that he is possessed by Beelzebul and casts out demons by the prince of demons (3:22). The rhetoric of Jesus’ response is important. Jesus begins with a rhetorical dilemma, which also functions as the proposition to be proven: ‘How can Satan cast out Satan?’ (v. 23). The expected negative answer is then evoked by dual parabolic sayings on internal division (vv. 24–25). This initial questioning concludes in 3:26 with a further implication of the answer to the rhetorical question that if Satan suffers internal division, his reign is at an end” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 133-134).

The same commentary goes on to sum up: “As noted, christology and discipleship are integrated. Jesus, who manifests God’s presence by freeing people from the power of evil and by healing, is the master of an undivided household. The radically communal nature of discipleship is stressed by the incorporation into a new family that does the will of God. Therefore “doing the will of God” and becoming a member of Jesus’ family is in the most

radical sense being willing, like Jesus, to accept even suffering and rejection as willed by God. Peter will fail to do this in 8:32–33 when he is charged with “thinking human thoughts” and not “the thoughts of God.” Solidarity with Jesus in suffering makes a person into a brother, sister, or mother to Jesus who himself is truly “son” when he can address God with faith and trust before his impending cross. Such solidarity involves membership in a new human family not determined by blood ties but by the shedding of the blood of Christ” (J R Donahue and D J Harrington, op cit, 135).

Specific

family: The English word “family” “translates the Greek *hoi par’ autou* (lit. ‘those from him’). Though some prefer to translate this phrase as ‘disciples’ (see 4:10, *hoi peri auton*) rather than as ‘relatives’ or ‘family,’ the phrase is used in the Greek papyri for family members, and the Markan sandwich technique suggests that the people of 3:21 are the same as the family members of 3:31–35. The ‘Western’ text tradition (Mss D and W) found this reading so embarrassing that they changed it to read: ‘When the scribes and the others heard about him, they went out to seize him, for they said, “He is beside himself”’ (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1971] 81–82)” (J R Donahue and D J Harrington, op cit, 129).

to restrain him: The Greek verb – *kratēsai* – is a little stronger than our English word “restrain” might suggest. For example, Mark uses it to tell us that “Herod himself had sent men who arrested (*ekratēsen*) John” (Mark 6:17). It is also used in Mark 14:44: “Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest (*kratēsate*) him”’. The same verb is used of the hostile intent of the scribes in 12:12 (“When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest (*kratēsai*) him.”) and Mark 14:1 (“It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest (*kratēsantes*) Jesus by stealth and kill him.”)

“He has gone out of his mind”: This translates the Greek word *exestē*. It is an expression used in classical Greek. “Such a charge would hardly be made up by the early church, and so this may reflect the historical view of the relatives of Jesus, none of whom had been called to the circle of the Twelve” (J R Donahue and D J Harrington, op cit, 129).

the scribes: These folk are constantly in conflict with Jesus – see Mark 7:1, 5; 10:33; 11:18, 27; 14:1. An ominous note is sounded by the statement that they have come down from Jerusalem.

Beelzebul: There is no reference to Beelzebul in the Septuagint representing an evil spirit. In 2 Kings 1:3 & 6 there is a reference to “Baalzebub”, which literally means “Lord of the Flies” – a mocking distortion of the Canaanite god of Ekron (J R Donahue and D J Harrington, op cit, 129). In the Christian Scriptures, apart from this reference in Mark, Beelzebul is mentioned in Luke 11:15, 18–19 and Matthew 10:25, 12:24, and 27. Scholars tell us that those references in Matthew and Luke come from Q not Mark. However, Mark leaves us in no doubt as to the reference, using different ways of saying it: “by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons”. And he uses the name, “Satan” three times. The word “Satan” simply

means “adversary” or “accuser” – as in Job 1-2. Without losing this adversarial note, Mark identifies this “adversary” with “the ruler of demons”.

We are reminded of Jesus’ initial proclamation in Mark 1:14: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” There is a battle underway between the kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Beelzebul/Satan. It is worth noting that Jesus’ first miracle is the cure of the man with the “unclean spirit” – see Mark 1:21-28. One commentator sums up: “Exorcism has been so far, and will remain throughout the Galilean period, one of the most prominent aspects of Jesus’ public activity” (R T France, *The Gospel of Mark: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002, 168).

whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin: This is a challenging text, prompting differing interpretations down the ages: “The ‘unforgivable sin’ has been interpreted in various ways throughout church history. Augustine exercised a major influence by describing it as final impenitence and resistance to God’s grace (Augustine, *Sermo 71*, in MPL 71.38, cols. 444–67, translated and edited by Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956] 6:318–32). In medieval theology (e.g., Peter Lombard) it is a genus containing six species of sin: despair, presumption, impenitence, obstinacy, resisting divine truth known as such, and envy of another’s spiritual welfare (see *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 13:248). In the English Calvinist tradition, which has strongly influenced religious ideas in the United States, fear of this sin was an overriding concern. It consisted in resisting divine truth with malice and was a sign of final reprobation. Also in line with the Augustinian tradition, it became a weapon in theological controversy in which opponents were regarded as guilty of the unpardonable sin (see Baird Tipson, “A Dark Side of Seventeenth-Century English Protestantism: The Sin Against the Holy Spirit,” *HTR* 77 [1984] 301–30). Contemporary Catholic doctrine continues the Augustinian tradition by describing it as deliberate refusal to accept God’s mercy by repenting (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1864). These views represent developments beyond the NT text and must be constantly tested against the sense intended by the biblical author” (J R Donahue and D J Harrington, *op cit*, 134-135).

The same commentary adds later: “This passage also contains a caution against the improper use of charges about the ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’, which can cause great anguish to people. In Mark this sin is not final impenitence or refusal to accept doctrine, but a deliberate choice to interpret the presence of divine action as evil. As C.E.B. Cranfield notes, those who make this charge against Jesus are ‘duly accredited theological teachers of God’s people’ (the scribes), whose own contact with the Spirit takes place through study of the Torah. Those who most particularly must heed the warning of this verse today are ‘the theological teachers and official leaders of the churches’ (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark* 143)” (*Op cit*, 135-136).