

Unforgiveable Mk 3:20-35

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We're following on from the passage we looked at last week, where we saw Jesus facing hostile scrutiny from the religious leaders.

The chaps with dark glasses and note pads.

And the theme continues in today's reading.

This time there's a delegation of religious heavies come down from Jerusalem.

Now folks didn't travel down from Jerusalem to Galilee for fun.

You can imagine a bunch of religious heavies from the diocese turn up in Hastings.

'Oh we heard there was good fishing from the pier, just passing through.'

Yeah right.

They're here for a reason.

People from the CBD don't just turn up in Hastings because they were passing through.

If you spot them here, you know it's for a reason.

That's how it was with religious heavies from Jerusalem turning up in Galilee.

They came for a reason.

Clearly news about Jesus had penetrated all the way to the capital.

And they decided they better suss out what was going on.

The teachers of the law who were sent probably came with a remit -

"Find out whether this Jesus character is demon possessed."

And so they came down for a look.

But our passage today is different from last week, in that it's not just the religious heavies who turn up.

Another group turns up.

We meet them at the start of the passage and the end of the passage.

This is kind of a device for Mark.

When he's telling a story,

and he puts something at the start and the end,
he's telling you that this has some bearing on what's in the middle.
Bible scholars who do work on Mark have a very technical term for this.
They call it a Markan Sandwich.
The bit about Jesus' family is the bread.
The bit about the teachers of the law is the filling.
Mark's telling us those two are related.

Here's what I think Mark is trying to tell us by the connection.
Opposition can come from the misdirected kindness of loved ones,
as much as from the hostility of those opposed to the message.
Who are the people who turn up at the start and end of our passage?
It's Jesus' family.
It's his mother and brothers.
And let's be absolutely clear,
this is not a family reunion.
This is not a social visit.
Many people when they read the last part of the passage,
wonder at Jesus' words to the crowd, Mk 3:34-35,
"Here are my mother and brothers!
Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."
And the usual explanation runs something like this,
"Jesus is on a divine mission.
As the Son of God,
he doesn't have time at this point in his ministry
for the usual niceties of family life.
His family need to recognise the priority of his teaching ministry.
These crowds need a saviour.
Jesus' family needs to let him get on with the ministry.
And Jesus is gently letting his family know this."
Well it's all true as far as it goes.
But there's more to it.
And because there's 9 verses from verse 22 to verse 30
that separate the earlier section about Jesus family,
it's easy to miss that they are connected.

Jesus family think that Jesus has lost his marbles.
They have turned up to take him in hand.
Listen to verse 21,
"When his family heard about this,
they went to take charge of him,
for they said,
"He is out of his mind.""
No doubt at all that Jesus' family were well motivated.
Unlike the teachers of the law,
they loved Jesus.
They just didn't want to see him hurt himself.
They were concerned enough
that the whole delegation went down together.
Scholars believe that Joseph had died by this stage of Jesus' life.
So his mother and his brothers made up the complete group
who could together approach him and try to get him to see reason.

What was it that made Jesus' family convinced that he had lost the plot?
Well it's the stuff we were reading about last week.
Jesus was intentionally antagonising the religious leaders.
When he saw a man with a shrivelled hand
in the synagogue on the Sabbath,
he didn't say, "Come back tomorrow, mate, and I'll heal you."
He said, "Stand up in front of everyone."
Jesus is not doing things cowering in a corner.
He's calling out the religious leaders,
laying down an open challenge.
Not only did the religious leaders see him break the Sabbath.
Everyone in the synagogue saw him break the Sabbath.
Jesus was out and proud.
To do good.
To bring life.
He would break the Sabbath.
And he would tell everyone about it.
So the religious leaders are planning to kill him.

And no doubt his family heard some whispers about that.
And so they had come
to whisper a few thought of their own in Jesus' ear.
"Jesus, my son, you are doing a lot of good.
But you won't be able to keep doing good
if the religious heavies put you death.
How about playing along with them a bit?
Just to give you enough space to get your message out.
Try to win them over instead of publically antagonising them.
The Lord has told me that you are capable of great things.
Don't spoil it by being overzealous, my son."
It's well motivated stuff.
But sadly it's opposing the gospel message.
It's opposing the God who sent his Son to bring that gospel message.

And you know, if you are involved in Christian ministry,
whether as a lay person or an ordained person,
you will have people try to take charge of you in the same way.
Following Jesus inevitably involves making some decisions
that seem radical
to those who worship at the idols of comfort, career and convenience.
How many missionaries heading overseas
have had their families give them some well meaning advice
about the lack of superannuation they will have to retire on?
Most, I have spoken to.
How many ministers who take churches
outside of the comfortable suburbs where they grew up,
have people giving them a stern warning
about sacrificing their children's education?
How many faithful lay people have people trying to help them recognise
that it's possible to be generous without being foolish?
Or that their career prospects would be greatly enhanced
if they said yes when the boss asked them to do something unethical?
People want a tabby cat instead of Aslan the roaring lion.
People want a Jesus who will add a respectable religious veneer

to their nice middle class lives.

But if we follow Jesus,

then we won't allow the well meaning to 'take charge of us'

when what that means is to deflect us away from the purposes of God.

But it's not just us that people will try to take charge of.

People are still trying to take charge of Jesus.

Hey Jesus, your words are a little bit abrupt for today's polite society.

Most of your teaching is good.

But we need to moderate your message at some points,

otherwise people will get upset.

And you are the most compassionate man who ever lived,

you wouldn't want people getting upset, would you?

What we'll do for you Jesus,

is to reinterpret your words,

until they agree with us.

Is that OK?

Well it wasn't OK when Jesus walked the land of Palestine,

and so it's not OK now.

We can't take charge of Jesus.

That's like trying to control the Burdekin River in flood with a fish tank.

We need to let Jesus take charge of us.

So that's Jesus' family.

They thought he was mad.

Next we move to the teachers of the law.

They thought that Jesus was bad.

Listen to their charge against him in verse 22.

"He is possessed by Beelzebul!

By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

So there are two charges against Jesus.

1. He's possessed by the devil.

2. He drives out demons by the power of the devil.

Jesus answers the second charge first in verses 23-27

Then he answers the first charge in verses 28-30.

So charge number 2 -
Jesus is driving out demons by the power of the devil.
Jesus says that is not logical.
How can you drive out the work of the devil by the power of the devil?
It just doesn't make sense.
It would signal the end of the devil.
Countries that fall into civil war don't get stronger.
They collapse.
We might think it would be nice
if the devil was divided against himself.
But that would be wishful thinking.
Satan exists.
He's more disgusting, more malicious, more nasty
than you can possibly imagine.
And he's not going to be finally finished off until Jesus returns.
No, what's going on in Jesus' ministry
is something far different
to demons being driven out by the power of the devil.
Here's what it's like.
It's like someone entering a strong man's house,
tying him up and flogging his stuff.
Now lots of people read that
and they can't work out quite what Jesus is getting at.
The reason it's hard to understand
is because Jesus is picturing himself as a thief.
Now we wouldn't normally think of Jesus as a thief.
So what's he getting at?
Jesus is the thief.
He's broken into Satan's house.
Satan is the strong man,
because Satan is a very tough and tricky customer.
But Jesus has tied him up,
because Jesus is far more powerful than Satan.
What is the strong man's house that Jesus has broken into?

It's this world.

In another place, Jesus calls Satan the prince of this world because this world is his domain.

But Jesus has broken in and is stealing his stuff.

What is his stuff?

It's us.

Satan thinks he owns us.

And unless we put our faith in Jesus, he's right.

But Jesus is busy nicking Satan's stuff.

That means he's saving people like you and me.

Stealing us out of Satan's house and bringing us into his Father's house.

If you trust in Jesus,

then you are stolen goods.

You've been stolen from Satan.

And you've got a better home now.

That's Jesus' response to the charge

that he drives out demons by the devil's power.

Now his response to the charge that he is possessed by the devil.

3:28-29 says,

"Truly I tell you,

people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter,

but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

This is a favourite for discussion at youth groups.

The thought that there is a sin for which you can never be forgiven

is peculiarly attractive to the teenage mind.

What could it be?

Well it's precisely the sin of saying that Jesus is in league with the devil.

When we look at Jesus,

we are in fact looking at the power of the Holy Spirit in action.

When Jesus drives out a demon,

he does it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus teaches the crowds,

he is teaching the God's word,

which is the sword of the Holy Spirit.
When Jesus heals the sick or feeds a crowd,
he does it by the power of the Holy Spirit.
So what does it mean to blaspheme the Holy Spirit?
It means to fail to recognise Jesus for who he is.

Yes you can do it in a blatant way,
like the Pharisees in today's passage.
Say that Jesus is possessed by the devil.
That would be to fail to recognise the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus.
But it's also possible to fail to recognise Jesus for who he is
by turning a blind eye to Jesus,
just ignoring him.

I do lots of funerals for people who didn't recognise Jesus.
It's very sad.
You ask the congregation to remember the things they loved
about the person who has died.
Because that's all you can give to them.
Memories.
Happy memories.
But memories that hold no hope for the future.
You can tell them about the promises held out
for those who put their trust in Jesus.
No more death or tears or mourning or crying or pain.
But you can't say anything directly about their loved one.
And often they come up to you after the service,
and they say,
"At least she's in a better place now."
You can't say,
"I'm sorry. I don't think that's right."
But you'd love to.
You'd love to wake them up.
To urge them recognise who Jesus is before it's too late.
Blaspheming the Holy Spirit,

is failing to recognise the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus.
That can be done by passive indifference
just as much as by active hostility.

What does Jesus mean when he says that is an 'eternal sin'?
Could those teachers of the law never be saved?

No that's not it.

They are in actually the same position as Jesus' family.
Both have failed to recognise the Holy Spirit in Jesus.
It's just as bad to call him mad as bad.

It's an eternal sin
because if you fail to repent of it,
it will have eternal consequences.

You can slander me.

"Tim Anderson is the biggest drop kick since
since Fred Fanning did a 116 yard drop kick
for Melbourne vs Richmond in 1939."

What happens?

Well I might be offended.

What if you never repent of your sin?

Will God hold it against you?

Not if your trust is in Jesus.

And it's quite possible to have a genuine faith in Jesus
and at the same time think that I'm a drop kick.

If you trust in Jesus,

All your sins have been nailed to the cross.

Even the ones your rebellious heart is still trying to justify.

But what if you slander Jesus?

Well if you slander Jesus,

you can't at the same time have a genuine faith in Jesus.

And so that slander is an eternal sin.

It can't be forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross.

Well we come back to where we started.
Being part of Jesus' family.
Who are Jesus' family?
In 3:35, Jesus says,
"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."
What is God's will?
Top of the list is recognising Jesus for who he is.
Jesus family didn't manage it.
They thought he was mad.
The teachers of the law didn't manage it.
They thought he was bad.
Who did manage it?
The crowds who were sitting around him listening to him teach.
They were doing God's will.
They were recognising the Holy Spirit in Jesus.
That's why they were hanging on his every word.
And so when Jesus looked at them he said,
"Here are my mother and brothers!"

Let me finish with a plea for gospel urgency.
When Jesus is talking about people we know and love
being guilty of an eternal sin,
this is not something to pass over as if it has little significance.
We can do Christianity Explored with people who are interested.
We are at the moment with some playgroup mums.
You could bring your loved ones to church at Easter time.
What better time than Resurrection Sunday
to celebrate Jesus victory over death?
You loved ones might not be at all interested.
In that case, you could pray for them.
We pray for the lost every Sunday at 5pm.
You could come along and join us.
If you come,

we'll pray for your loved ones.