

GOSPEL READING FOR JUNE 7, 2015

START WITH SCRIPTURE: Mark 3:20-35

OBSERVE:

Prophets, visionaries and saints seldom have a smooth ride. In the Gospel of Mark, the distance between the beginning of Jesus' ministry with his baptism and public controversy is very short. Jesus has allowed his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath, and has healed on the Sabbath, in defiance of the Pharisees' interpretation of the law. He has even dared to forgive the sins of a paralyzed man before healing him, a prerogative reserved to God alone!

There are three divergent reactions to his ministry in this passage:

- he is so popular with the people (the ha' eretz, the 'people of the land,' i.e., the common folk, he can't even find leisure to eat!
- his family react anxiously, because they believe he may be mentally ill.
- the most religious people of the day, the teachers of the law, are determined to discredit him because in their view he is flouting the law.

Jesus counters the accusations that he is in league with the devil with a deft use of logic: if Jesus is casting out demons, then he is de facto the enemy of the demons. How then can he possibly be on Satan's team? *If Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.*

Jesus' next remark is a little cryptic: *no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house.* Who is the strong man, and who is the thief? In a surprising twist the strong man seems to be Satan, who is being bound by Jesus! And what is being plundered? Perhaps those who are being held in bondage by Satan are being released! This would be consistent with Jesus' reference later to his purpose in coming, when he describes himself *as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)*. He has come to rescue those held hostage by the *strong man*.

Then there is an even more cryptic passage, when Jesus warns against blaspheming the Holy Spirit. He says this because the teachers of the law have accused him of having an *impure spirit*. In other words, if Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Son of God, then they are guilty of rejecting not only him but God!

No doubt, Jesus' family members can see the tension building and they seek to do the "responsible" thing — this is a family intervention to try and 'talk some sense into Jesus.'

But Jesus declares that his ultimate loyalties transcend family and biological ties. And so does his true family. He has handpicked this new family, his disciples, in Mark 3:13-19. And now he seals them, and presents the criterion required to be a part of his family: *"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

APPLY:

There are two key takeaways from this passage. One addresses the issue of the "unforgivable sin." The other, our relationship with Jesus.

On the issue of the “unforgiveable sin” of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit there is much confusion. We tend to think of blasphemy as a form of speech, like ‘taking the name of the Lord in vain.’ What Jesus addresses here, though, seems deeper.

What the teachers of the law have done, in accusing him of being *possessed by Beelzebul* (the Lord of the Flies, aka the prince of demons) is to invert the moral universe. Good has become evil, and evil good. The prophet Isaiah has a similar warning:

*Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter (Isaiah 5:20).*

But why is this moral reversal unpardonable, when Jesus clearly says *people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter* — all sins except the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Here is my take: receiving forgiveness of sins requires an awareness that one has sinned, followed by repentance. That means that the pardoned sinner has a moral conscience that can recognize how they have violated the moral law. However, those who have called good evil and evil good are no longer capable of discerning good from evil. Therefore they see no need to repent. Instead of recognizing God’s moral authority they have become a law unto themselves. If they could recognize their sin, they could repent; but because they have become blind to it they do not.

Jesus also addresses this same issue with the Pharisees in John 9:41, when he tells the Pharisees that *“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”* As the popular proverb puts it, “there are none so blind as those who refuse to see.”

The second important application in this passage is far more positive: what does it mean to be a member of the family of Jesus? The answer is quite simple: *“Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”*

We can certainly elaborate by citing Galatians 4 and Romans 8 in describing our adoption as children of God for Christ’s sake; and 1 John in describing the blessings of being called children of God. But this is very concrete: do God’s will by trusting him and obeying him, and you are a member of Christ’s family.

RESPOND:

There’s an old saying that if you are worried that you have committed the unpardonable sin, don’t worry — you haven’t. Your conscience is still intact. You are still sensitive to the reality of sin, and capable of repentance.

Perhaps it is more important for us to concentrate less on the “don’ts” here, and more on the “do’s”— do strive to do the will of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The rest will likely take care of itself.

Lord, I am conscious daily of my sin and my need for your grace. Make me ever more sensitive to your Holy Spirit so that I may continue to grow. And make your will ever more clear so that I may obey it. I want to remain a part of your family! Amen.

BY TOM LETCHWORTH

<https://soarlectionarybiblestudy.wordpress.com/2015/06/09/gospel-for-june-7-2015/>