

Bible Study Guide: Week of 5-31-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 3:20-35

[Jesus went home;] ²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that [Jesus and the disciples] could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But 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.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

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Our Gospel lesson this week is an abrupt change in tone and content from the last few weeks we spent in the Gospel of John. Here, we are early in Mark’s gospel. Jesus has been healing the sick and casting out demons throughout the region of Galilee. He has just called the 12 disciples to follow him. Now, he returns home. His popularity with the crowds is so great that he cannot even eat. It is not clear whether this means that the crowds were so thick around his house that he couldn’t leave to obtain food or whether it means that he was so busy ministering to the crowds that he didn’t have time to eat. In any case, as he popularity grows, so does the lore surrounding him. Some begin to say that Jesus is insane, prompting his family to intervene to try to reign in his ministry. This passage (20-21) flows fairly naturally into the narrative of verses 31-35. In both sections, the main issue is Jesus’ family failing to understand and embrace his mission. The flow of thought is interrupted by verses 22-30.

²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But 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.

The scribes emerge again as opponents of Jesus. They accuse him of being possessed by a demon, specifically “Beelzebul.” This term finds its origins in ancient Canaanite religion. Beelzebul was a member of the Canaanite pantheon. The name is a combination of “Ba’al,” meaning “Lord” and “Zebul” meaning “of the heavenly dwelling.” The ancient Hebrews changed this to “Beelzebub”—a combination of “Ba’al” meaning “Lord” and “Zebub” meaning “of the flies.” In this word play, the ancient Hebrews were able to mock the name of one of the chief deities of their rivals. In later Jewish thought, Beelzebul took on demonic overtones. Since the Jewish people insist on there being only one true God, lesser “gods” like Beelzebul were considered evil enemies of God, hence they became associated not with deity, but with unclean spirits or demonic activity. That seems to be the reference here for the scribes.

Jesus responds to their accusation that he is using demonic power to cast out demons by pointing out their logical inconsistency. He does this through what Mark calls “parables,” although these analogies lack a true parabolic structure. Instead, Jesus uses the images of a kingdom or a house divided to show that if he is indeed using Satan’s power against the forces of Satan, evil is doomed to fail. In

contrast, we know that he is using God's power against Satan with the same result—that evil is doomed to fail. Either way, Jesus is saying, Satan has met his match in the person of Jesus Christ. In one final somewhat troubling image, Jesus uses the imagery of a thief performing a home invasion to speak about his work. He is the one who is stronger than the “strong man”—that is, Satan.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

This passage is troubling, particularly when taken out of context. When read as a general statement of condemnation for those who “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit,” we may live in fear for ourselves or in judgment of others. In context, Jesus is turning the tables on the scribes who, in Mark 2:7 accused him of blasphemy for claiming to forgive sins. Here, Jesus points out that they are so blind to the truth that they have mistaken the activity of the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus for the work of an unclean Spirit. In essence, they have accused God of being satanic. Jesus points out that their thinking is so twisted, they cannot even see their own need for forgiveness and remain in sin.

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Here we pick up where we seem to have left off in v. 21. Not only do these final verses finish the narrative from that earlier verse, but they also allow Jesus to point beyond literal kinship to a new spiritual kinship he has come to offer and share. Those who do the will of God are indeed close and dear relatives of Jesus. This is, of course, in stark contrast not only to Jesus' own family's actions here (trying to restrain him), but also in stark contrast to the work of the scribes in the previous verses.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think people thought Jesus had “gone out of his mind?”**
- 2. What do you think Jesus means by the phrases “tying up the strong man” and “then the house can be plundered?”**
- 3. Jesus says those who do the will of God are his relatives. What does it mean to you to do the will of God?**