

Jesus had already faced Satan in the wilderness (1:13) and won His first victory, by resisting the temptations. Jesus therefore raised the stakes even higher, telling the scribes through the parable that the reason He could perform deliverance ministry was because He had in fact already 'tied up' the 'strong man' (3:27). He was 'stronger'! It is also possible, though we do not know for sure, that one of the titles of the Messiah used in Jesus' day was 'the One who is Stronger', which was derived from a number of key Old Testament prophecies (Isaiah 49:24f. 53:12 etc). If this was the case, then it certainly adds to the force of what Jesus said!

In verse 28, Jesus concluded what He had to say, beginning with the words 'Amen, I tell you' which Jesus used (in all the Gospels) when He wanted to say something of the utmost importance. After the confrontation with the scribes, He spoke directly to all who rejected what God was doing through Him and described their sin as 'unforgiveable' (3:29). Mark does not mention the Holy Spirit much in His Gospel (only four times), but this passage and His coming at Jesus' baptism are both significant. It was the coming of the Holy Spirit through baptism which God used to bless and empower Jesus to cast out demons, and here, Jesus wanted to emphasise that if people saw the evidence of this work and yet refused to believe that it was good and of God, then they removed themselves from the possibility of eternal forgiveness (3:29,30). How could someone possibly ask for forgiveness of sins from One they had so flagrantly denied? This was Jesus' completely understandable point.

### Application

The whole subject of the 'unforgiveable sin' of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is fraught with difficulty. It has been unhappily used to justify all manner of 'felt' un-forgiveness in a quite unjustifiable way. Here, in this context, Jesus clearly says that the people who commit this unforgiveable sin are those who knowingly refused to accept the work of the Holy Spirit through Him. The closest we can get to interpreting this for today is to say that the unforgiveable sin happens when people have the evidence of the Holy Spirit's good work (which is God's work, no less), and yet they choose to call it evil, not good. Again, it is always possible for people with psychological or spiritual needs to imagine that they might be in this position, but good pastors or counsellors know immediately that their job is to help such people away from this bondage, by the grace of God. Those who really see good and call it evil, and also describe evil as good, are quite different, more like those rich in power and influence who play games with the future of the planet and other people's lives for their own material benefit. They need to be confronted with the goodness of God, and the truth about the evil they do.

There is, however, a happier message here which comes just briefly at the end of the passage, and that is the first promise of Jesus in Mark's Gospel that His disciples would be His own family (3:35). In this passage there is no hint of division or of any reason for dispute or division. The family of God, indeed, the new 'people of God' founded on the twelve new leaders (or apostles, according to yesterday's reading - 3:13f.) would be united in Jesus, and Him alone.

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss what it was that might have made people say of Jesus 'He is out of His mind' (3:21)
2. How useful is it to talk about Satan as the leading figure of evil, today? In what other ways does the Bible speak about evil?
3. Discuss in your group what kind of discussion the family of Jesus might have had after this incident.

### Discipleship

One thing which may help us face the reality of evil in our midst is to make a note of it and pray about it. In many discussions about 'evil', people talk in the abstract without any examples. Therefore, in the course of a week, try to keep a diary of things you come across which you feel are evil. Write down what this evil is, whether it is found in people or things, and what could be done about it. Pray about the things you write down, but keep this list and use it as part of your discussion with other Christians about the nature of evil in the world, and how Christ overcomes it.

### Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour of the World; we thank You and praise You for our heritage. May we be conscious of our responsibilities to those who come after us and seek to pass on the Gospel through all we do and say. We ask this in Your name, Jesus Christ, AMEN

### Prayer

Your provision and Your love, Lord Jesus, surpass every dream we have had, every desire we maintain, and every hope that we might have. You know us through and through, and confirm Your love for us in each and every day. Forgive us for not always accepting what You have done, and lead us by Your grace to receive everything You offer us. AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for all people who have been called by God to work amongst the poorest of the world. They can be found everywhere and in every country, and the Lord asks His people to open their eyes and see their need. Pray that Christian missionaries will be unashamed to address the worldly and spiritual needs of the poor, just as Jesus did in His ministry.

### Meditation

Help us get the balance right, Lord Jesus Christ,  
Between what we do for ourselves, and what we do for others.

When it is Your will, and it is right,  
Direct our thoughts towards ourselves;  
So that we may give attention to our spiritual life  
And all the responsibilities of living as Your people in the world.

When it is Your will, and it is right,  
Direct our thoughts towards other people;  
So that we may put the faith You have given us into action,  
And seek to preach the Gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons.

Help us get the balance right between these two,  
For the sake of our own spiritual health,  
The wellbeing of the whole church;  
And the good of all the world.

### Bible Study - Mark 3:20-35

<sup>20</sup> Then He went home, but a crowd gathered again, so that it was not possible for them even to eat. <sup>21</sup> When His relatives heard about this, they set out to take hold of Him, because people were saying, 'He is out of His mind.' <sup>22</sup> Now, the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul, for He casts out demons by the prince of the demons.' <sup>23</sup> So He summoned them, and spoke to them in parables; 'How can it be possible for Satan to cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan has risen in opposition to himself and has been divided, he cannot stand; moreover, his end has come. <sup>27</sup> So, no one can get into a strong man's house and ransack his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Only then can the house be ransacked. <sup>28</sup> Amen, I tell you, everything will be forgiven everyone; all their sins and whatever blasphemies they speak; <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit cannot ever have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.' <sup>30</sup> He spoke in this way because they said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

<sup>31</sup> Then His mother and His brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to Him to call Him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around Him, and they told Him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are looking for you outside.' <sup>33</sup> And He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' <sup>34</sup> Then He looked at those sat around Him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'

### Review

What an extraordinary passage of Scripture to read! There had indeed been some controversy in Jesus' ministry before this in Mark's Gospel, for example, in the reactions of the scribes and Pharisees to the healing of the paralytic (2:1-12) and the healing of man with a withered arm (3:1-6). After this, however, Jesus' ministry boiled over into an aggressive confrontation with His opponents. Two groups of people were involved, His own family members who appear to have become embarrassed at His actions, and the religious authorities who had already reached the conclusion that Jesus' work was of the devil. In yesterday's passage we read about how the crowds welcomed Jesus' ministry and also how Jesus chose the twelve apostles, but this almost violent scene appears to follow on straight after the previous incident in which Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath; as it says, 'The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians about how to have Him killed.' (3:6).

Within this passage, there is a big contrast between the reaction of the common people who made up the crowd, and the actions of those who were in opposition to Jesus' ministry; that is, His own family members and the religious authorities. It does not surprise us to read at the beginning that Jesus and His disciples could hardly move about because of the throng of people clamouring for His ministry, who could not get anything to eat (3:20)! At the end, Jesus looked around at the crowd who were with Him and said approvingly to them, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.' With these words, He warmly embraced those who stayed with Him and sought the Kingdom of God.

By contrast, members of His own extended family made a futile attempt to get hold of Jesus and remove Him from the crowds and from what He was doing. From their point of view, their family was becoming the gossip of the region because of Him, and Jesus was behaving in a way that might shatter their peaceful existence. Having known Him since He was young, they now thought that He was 'out of His mind' (3:21). Towards the end, when they were still struggling to reach Jesus because of the crowds (3:31,32), Jesus made it clear that their rejection meant that tragically, He could no longer think of them as His family (3:33,34).

The central part of our reading (3:22-27), however, deals with the rejection of Jesus by the religious authorities. They said that He could only perform miracles and deliverance because He was an agent of the devil, or 'Beelzebul'. For the first time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus spoke in parables (3:23) in order to defend Himself, and the parable about the Kingdom which was divided against itself (3:24,25) was sufficient to turn this attack against him on its head. Jesus said that if He was a demon casting out demons, then the Kingdom of evil was fatally divided and must therefore be already been defeated! Now this was certainly not true, according to the general understanding of the people of His day, who perceived Satan to be at work in their world. The second parable ridiculed the authorities. How could they explain their own saying about having to 'tie up a strong man' before stealing from him (3:27) without conceding that if Jesus was casting out demons, then he must have defeated the devil first!

At the heart of the passage is a saying of Jesus that has caused great controversy, and this is about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit' (3:28-30). Clearly, Jesus was disturbed by what He saw happening around Him; the threat from His family to stop His ministry, and the plots of the Pharisees to discredit Him were profoundly evil. This must be the background for what Jesus said about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'. The work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus was to heal people and set them free, and Jesus said that those who openly denied this work of obvious good in the world had clearly placed themselves beyond forgiveness. It is perhaps a sharp, but necessary word.

### Going Deeper

This is a fascinating episode in Jesus' life, but we must be very careful about how we apply it, for there is a great deal more to this text than meets the eye. We should at least remember that Jesus' mother Mary is mentioned (but not by name) amongst the family which Jesus apparently rejected; did He really mean to do this? Secondly, what does the talk about demons say to us who live in a world which regards such a description of evil with great scepticism?

#### **Jesus and his relatives.**

In some commentaries, this passage is treated as if the last five verses (3:31-35) form a separate story from the previous verses (3:20-30) concerning Jesus' dispute with the Pharisees about demons. However, when put together as in our reading, the whole passage begins and ends with reference to Jesus' family, and this seems to make sense. In addition, the Greek of verses 20 and 21 are a little obscure and you may find that some Bibles translate them

differently, being rather vague about who it was who thought Jesus was 'out of His mind'. Nevertheless, the picture painted by the text is this. There was gossip going around the Galilee region that Jesus was 'out of His mind' (3:21) and this expression in Greek is a colloquial way of saying 'He has a demon', or, 'He is mad'. What Jesus was doing made no sense to His relatives, because once Jesus had publicly chosen the disciples (3:13-19), they could see that He was beginning to act like a rabbi, and they knew He had no training. They found it intolerable to think that He could 'set Himself up' in such a manner and they came as a group to try and 'take hold of Him' (3:21). The Greek words used for this are stronger than is possible to translate, and it is clear that they came to take Jesus by force. They tried throughout the whole incident, and at the end, they were still 'outside' (3:31) trying to get in to Jesus and remove Him; but the crowds which earlier pursued Him and made life difficult for Him, now saved Him!

Because the whole passage begins and ends with this theme, it is important to see that their rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus was part of the 'sin against the Holy Spirit' which Jesus spoke so firmly against in the middle of the passage (3:27f.). There is more about this in the next section of the study, but before we move on, what does this say about Jesus and His relatives, and in particular, His mother Mary?

The family group who came to Jesus was made up of various 'relatives' (3:21), and also 'His mother and brothers' (3:31). There is no mention of Jesus' father, and many believe that Joseph died at some point in Jesus' childhood. This was the understanding of the early church, because we have no mention of him in any of the Gospels apart from the nativity stories, and his journey to the Temple when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41-51). Only two members of Jesus' family are mentioned later in Scripture; Mary (Jesus' mother) who was present at Jesus' death (John 19:25f.) and one brother, James, who became prominent in the church (Gal 1:19) and was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2). We do not know when Mary and James became believers in Jesus as the Messiah, but they did; so we must accept that Jesus' dismissal of His relatives in our story today (3:34) was certainly not a final dismissal of them. Mary and James, at least, found the way, through faith, to be a 'mother and a brother' to Jesus in the Kingdom of God.

The final saying is of course the highlight of the whole passage; 'whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.' (3:35). After His baptism, Jesus had learned to 'do the will of the Father' in preaching, healing and deliverance, and He was looking for people to follow Him, not just the special twelve apostles; His new way would become the path of salvation and eternal life. It was natural therefore that Jesus' first description of Christian discipleship should reflect this. This is still a challenge for all of us today because it reminds us of our basic duty to do God's will, and also, by doing this we become members of His special family, the Church. This is a unique and a high calling, and not something to be trivialised.

#### **The Pharisees and Satan**

Certainly, Jesus' work in casting out demons caused the religious authorities to send scribes from Jerusalem (3:22) not to listen to Jesus, but to deliver a considered verdict. They had received reports about Jesus and come to the conclusion that He had power over evil spirits because He was one Himself (3:22)! Their theory was that the demons lived in a hierarchical world in which higher demons could order lower ones around, and this was the logic which drove their charge against Jesus.

Jesus heard about this, apparently, before they even arrived, because Mark says that He 'summoned them' (3:23) to denounce what they had to say. A war of words was going on. The scribes from Jerusalem had already delivered their gossip in time for Jesus' own family to fear that He was 'out of His mind' (3:22), and they may have hoped that their message would bear more fruit amongst the crowds before Jesus had time to deal with it. Jesus knew their game, however, and acted. Noticeably, Jesus refused to be diverted by discussion about the different levels of demons and their relative authority; He went 'straight for the top', as we might say, to talk about Satan, the great accuser (which is what the name means in Hebrew), the head of the realms of evil and their dominance of the world (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11).

It is reckoned that Jesus used two well known parables to defeat the scribes on this occasion, the first one was the straightforward reflection that 'a kingdom which is divided against itself cannot stand' (3:24), and secondly, the somewhat obvious comment 'no one can get into a strong man's house and ransack his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man' (3:27). The two parables are so straightforward, they read as if they might come straight from the book of Proverbs! But it was the way Jesus put these two parables together which was so powerful.