

Mark 3:13-35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 04 April 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 3 verses 13 to 35. And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

He appointed the twelve, Simon, to whom he gave the name Peter, James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder, Andrew and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus, and Simon the zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, He is out of his mind. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.

And he called them to him and said 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 is coming to an end. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man.

[1 : 2 8] Then indeed he may plunder his house. Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

For they were saying, He has an unclean spirit. And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, Your mother and your brothers are outside seeking you.

And he answered them, Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.

In the latter half of Mark chapter 3, the company of disciples around Jesus starts to assume a greater prominence in the narrative. They have been present to this point, but now they are more directly considered.

The account of the choice of the twelve has some particular details that aren't found in either Luke or in Matthew. It begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and calling to him a particular selection of the disciples.

[2 : 3 6] Perhaps we should recall Exodus 24 at this point, where Israel is constituted around Mount Sinai, with Moses, the priests, and the elders going up on the side of the mountain, Moses going up to the very top, and then the rest of Israel gathered around.

We might also connect the twelve with the patriarchs and Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve sons of Jacob. They don't just happen to be twelve people.

It's important that they are twelve. They were called the twelve, and when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement, because they had to have the full complement of the twelve present.

They're appointed by Christ so that they might be with him, so that they might be sent out to preach, and also that they might have authority to cast out demons. And the importance of proximity to and witnessing to Christ's life and hearing his teaching is paramount.

They need to be around Christ and with him and see the way he lives, see the way he prays, hear what he teaches, and learn his explanation of his teaching. They're chosen also for a commission, that they might be sent out as his representatives to preach and to proclaim the gospel to the cities and towns of Israel.

[3 : 48] And they're granted authority to cast out demons, to continue Jesus' own ministry against the demons and the demonic forces at work in Israel. The twelve are listed, beginning with Simon and James and John.

They're the three core disciples. Simon is the first disciple in each list that we have of the disciples. He's the leader of the twelve. Peter is the one who will speak as the natural spokesperson of the group.

He's the one that will pioneer the mission on the day of Pentecost. He will authorise the mission to Samaria, and he will also break the new ground of mission to the Gentiles. Judas is the last in every list of the disciples.

He's occupying the position of the least honour. And we're told that he betrays Christ as well at this point. So it explains in part why he is occupying the position that he is.

We should observe that Jesus gives each of the three core disciples a new name, presumably declaring the sort of people that they will become. They are privileged in other ways.

[4 : 45] They accompany him up the Mount of Transfiguration, and also in Gethsemane. Why are they given the names that they're given? Well, Peter would become the rock. He would be an essential part of the foundation of the church.

The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and particularly the apostles. The apostles are the foundation stones in different ways.

And Peter is the key foundation stone of the apostles. He's the leading apostle. He's an essential part of the foundation of the church. James and John are often said to be sons of thunder because they wanted to call down fire from heaven in Luke 9, verse 54.

Thunder, however, generally has more positive connotations in scripture, being associated with God's powerful voice. God is generally the one who is associated with thunder. And James and John will become strong and powerful witnesses, bearing the thunder of God.

Now, just as Peter the rock could become like the stumbling block for Christ, as he sought to persuade him not to go to Jerusalem and to crucifixion, so the sons of thunder could fall into the trap of, in trying to call down fire from heaven, twisting the true significance of their name.

[5 : 56] In the Old Testament, there are a few key people who have their names changed, like Abraham and Sarai and Jacob. And James, John and Peter should be included in this select group of persons who have their names changed by the Lord.

The twelve are a band of brothers with Jesus. And perhaps we should see in the background of this, David's mighty men. Jesus is the Davidic king in Mark. He's the man of action.

He's going from place to place, straightway, immediately. And in the same way as David, he's surrounded by his mighty men. Like David, he has a larger group of mighty men.

And then he has a core group within that larger group. David has three mighty men who are particularly close to him, the core group of mighty men, in 2 Samuel chapter 23, verses 8 to 12.

Although Jesus has many female followers, including a number who are seemingly more prominent in the narrative than certain members of the twelve, the twelve are all male. They're like a military company. And they're prepared for doing battle against the demons, for scoping out the land, proclaiming the message of the kingdom, and also acting as the guardians of the church and the foundation of the church in the future.

[7 : 05] Jesus goes back home to Capernaum and is once again completely mobbed by a crowd. And it's making it very difficult for him to do anything. And his own family go out from Nazareth to seize him.

They believe that he's lost his mind. Presumably they've been hearing strange reports from Capernaum and elsewhere. And it's troubling to hear that his very own family was so disbelieving of his ministry.

But this is followed by conflict with scribes from Jerusalem. So there's people coming from Nazareth, his own family, and there are people coming from Jerusalem. Once again, Jesus' ministry of exorcism is front and centre.

It's important to see how central it is in Mark. Jesus is the exorcist in Mark so much of the time. He's going around and he's having these power confrontations with Satan and his demons.

This is a conflict. It's a battle that's being waged. Jesus is not just a teacher. Jesus is not just a prophet. Jesus is the man of action engaged in conflict and battle with Satan and his minions.

[8 : 05] They accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of the demons. But then Jesus gives a parable that explains he's the one entering into the house of Satan, the strong man, and plundering it.

And he could not do that unless he had bound Satan. Christ has come to deliver them from their oppression by Satan. In the background of Jesus' teaching here, we should probably hear Isaiah chapter 49 verses 24 to 26.

Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? For thus says the Lord, even the captives of the mighty shall be taken. And the prey of the tyrant be rescued.

For I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

While all other sorts of slander might be forgiven people, blaspheming against the Holy Spirit will not. When people attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to an evil spirit, they are maligning God himself.

[9 : 11] The point of Jesus here is to challenge those who are attributing the manifest work of the Holy Spirit of God to Satan himself. While many people of tender conscience have struggled with this text, wondering whether they have committed the unforgivable sin, if you actually look at the context, it seems to be dealing with a very specific type of situation that involves direct and willful opposition and maligning of the work of Christ and the Spirit.

Not only disbelieving, but presenting that work of the Spirit as if it were the work of Satan himself. As we look through the rest of the New Testament, we see people like Saul of Tarsus being converted, someone who persecuted the church, who was murderously opposed to Christ and all that he stood for.

And if Christ can save such a person as an example, then what we're dealing with here is a very extreme case of willful and persistent rejection of the Spirit of God, an attribution of that which is most holy to that which is most evil, unclean and perverse.

Who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? It's a key question throughout this passage. Jesus has just chosen his disciples, the insiders, who will be the core group around him.

Then his own family prove themselves to be outsiders. They don't believe him. They believe he's mad and they try and take him away by force. Then he is challenged by the scribes as hostile outsiders.

[10 : 34] And finally, we see this contrast between the natural family and his disciples. And Jesus speaks about those around him as his brothers, sister, mother. Jesus isn't just an independent teacher, an exorcist.

He's forming a family around him, a group of people who are not just followers, but people who are sharing in a community of life with him. A question to consider.

Why do you think that Jesus discriminated among his wider group of committed disciples and followers, choosing 12 to be especially close to him and three of them to be even closer?