

The Unforgiveable Sin Mark 3:20-35

Well friends, we're only three chapters into our journey with Jesus, and He is already facing criticism and opposition. His ministry has barely just begun and **He is already a lightning rod for controversy.**

We might wonder if he is really off to a good start or not for someone who is supposed to be the Savior of the world. How can controversy be good for that?

Last week we saw that his difficulties centered on the fact that it was difficult for some people to get a handle on who He was and what He was all about. That was because Jesus and His disciples didn't meet the typical religious expectations and practices of the day.

We might think perhaps He would have set himself up for success if he was better able to connect and meet those religious expectations.

Now, this week it seems the controversy has escalated because many people have made up their mind about Jesus - but not because they have him figured out... but because of how His ministry to date has affected their lives.

And friends there are three groups of people whom His ministry has affected - **the Crowds, his Family, and the Jerusalem Lawyers.**

The crowds have been the focus of his ministry and it is attracting them. Jesus is gentle with them and accepts them. He frees them from demonic possession, heals their sick and declares that their sins are forgiven.

His family however is not appreciating all the attention and scandal which his ministry is causing them. It is damaging their reputation and social standing and is an embarrassment to them.

And the Jerusalem Lawyers, the so-called experts in God's law from the Center of Religious life in Jerusalem, are threatened by Him. He is not one of them, who is he? Where did he come

from? His popularity threatens their authority and his teaching seems to contradict theirs.

Friends it hasn't taken Jesus long to make an impact on people – and I wonder... in the three weeks that we've been observing Him through the gospel of Mark, **how has He impacted you?**

Have you been reminded of how at particular times in your life He has ministered to you? Healed you? Freed you from bad habits, emotional blockage, addiction or even evil spirits? Are you reminded of when you received His forgiveness for your sins?

Or, are you embarrassed by the Jesus like his family was? In our day and age of religious tolerance Jesus' claim in John 14:6 "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" is downright scandalous and awkward and admitting we believe it can be damaging to our reputation.

Or friends, maybe in some way you find yourself threatened by Jesus. As we saw last week – Jesus doesn't come attempting to meet our religious expectations, he has his own agenda.

Friends Jesus changes religious things – things that may have been familiar and comforting to us.

Maybe the fact that we hear about Jesus casting out demons shakes our materialistic worldview – we weren't aware that there were evil spiritual forces that could possess us and harm us, that's a bit disconcerting!

Maybe the fact that Jesus can simply walk up to people and command them to follow him, and override their plans for their life with his own – as he did with Peter, Andrew, James and John and the rest of the twelve disciples gets our backs up! Our lives are ours to do with as we want right?

And friends how **Jesus affects us determines how we react to him...what we decide about Him.**

So the crowds have decided to follow Jesus. They want to be around him and get close to him. Anyone who hangs out with them, accepts them, heals them, delivers them and forgives them is worth following.

And Jesus family has decided to come and try and contain and control Him because they think He is out of his mind - all these reports about miracles, arguing with the religious leaders, and claiming the authority of God by forgiving sins?

They decide they need to bring him under control before He gets himself and their family in some real trouble.

But they might be a bit too late. The reports about this wandering Rabbi have already made their way back to the center of Religious authority – Jerusalem!

And they have decided that what Jesus is doing threatens and undercuts their authority and influence over the people so they must undermine Jesus to restore their power.

You see they cannot deny what Jesus is doing, too many people have experienced it, too many people have been helped, so their strategy is to turn the people away from Jesus by saying that **He is ministering by the power of an evil spirit.**

It's sort of like Environmental groups in Canada receiving funding from people who want them to disrupt energy projects which conflict with their own financial interests, or a someone funding a Woman's shelter with drug and prostitution money they make in their biker gang.

You get the picture; suddenly the Environmentalist isn't the noble crusader anymore, the shelter benefits from the addiction and abuse it stands against.

But it's not just a smear campaign that the Teachers of the Law are engaging in, they actually believe it. They are convinced that Jesus is in league with the devil because they can't see how it lines up with how God has worked in Israel in the past and how they understood the Law

Remember, in spite of the fact that they had added to it and twisted it, the Teachers of the Law worked with the material that God had revealed to Moses.

So for as much as they could not deny the miracles that Jesus was doing, Jesus could not deny the legitimacy and validity of

what the Teachers of the Law stood for in terms Israel's unique relationship and knowledge of the One True God.

So Jesus counters them by using their charges to his own advantage. He puts them on the horns of a dilemma where they must admit either way that Satan's power is broken.

On one hand, it's unreasonable to believe that the Devil would go around freeing his own captives. The nature of Jesus ministry repudiates the charge of having power from an evil spirit.

But if he is indeed operating by an evil spirit, then it would mean that Satan's has lost control of his subordinates and has a full out rebellion in his ranks – and his kingdom is doomed. That's good news for anyone who is oppressed by it.

They can't argue against either point, so in their astonished silence Jesus speaks up and states the obvious – the reason He can go around casting out demons and freeing people from oppression is because He is stronger than the Devil, in fact He's tied the Devil up and rendered him powerless to stop

Him. So far so good – but then Jesus says something which sounds horribly ominous and incredibly disturbing:

“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.”

And suddenly all we can think about is “**will never be forgiven**” and the way it comes across to us sounds like – you might have you've had all your sins forgiven,

But... if you somehow end up blaspheming the Holy Spirit... sorry too bad for you – that is unforgivable, it will undo all your previous forgiveness.

But friends, the good news is that is not what Jesus means.

Jesus is retaliating against the attempted smear campaign by the teachers of the Law. What he is saying here is first and foremost directed towards them – it's not some sort of cryptic warning directed at us.

You see Jesus has to do something to regain his credibility in front of the crowds, he's successfully defended himself but he needs to go on the offensive.

So he transitions from defense to offense by saying – *“people can be forgiven for all their sins and every slander they utter”*

This is correct, under the Law of Moses God had promised to forgive sins if his people confessed them and offered the appropriate sacrifices – that was true....and the teachers of the Law would have been forced to agree with Him.

But then Jesus insinuates that they don't really understand the Law...He says “But whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit...” matching their accusation of demonic power with an equally damaging accusation of blasphemy – the worst offense a teacher of the Law could be accused of.

To be accused that they had spoken falsely of God or the Spirit of the LORD would ruin their reputation.

And Jesus specifically charges them with blaspheming the Holy Spirit, not only because it identifies the power by which He is ministering...

But because the Holy Spirit was most commonly known as the power by which God had always raised up and empowered leaders in Israel's past to deliver and restore the nation when they were wandering from God and being exploited by a foreign nation. Remember the Judges and the Prophets.

So, Jesus has turned the tables on the Teachers of the Law.

Instead of exposing Jesus as a fraud – they unexpectedly find themselves on the opposite side of God's plan to deliver His people.

Jesus Christ has come to deliver the people from their sin of being unfaithful covenant partners with God. He does so by casting out demons, healing the sick and forgiving sins.

But Jesus will also restore Israel to covenant faithfulness.

Remember at his baptism God the Father announcing... “You are my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased”

So Jesus is recognized by God as the only true, faithful covenant partner. Opposing Him and his work in anyway is to cut oneself off from the covenant - the arrangement wherein forgiveness is offered. Thus by definition what they are doing is...unforgiveable with lasting – eternal – consequences.

So... this ominous and disturbing statement isn't something we need to be afraid of. It's not like that proverbial "hidden clause" in a contract which will undo our salvation if we aren't careful.

Now...Because of all the attention that we've given to explain what Jesus has just said about an unforgiveable sin- we might miss that the point of this whole passage is to force us to decide who we think Jesus is and how we will react to him.

But as we make up our minds, we need to take into account that those who were threatened or embarrassed by Jesus, and thus decided to oppose him in some way were warned about the long term consequences such a decision would entail.

We see Jesus effectively disowning his family in front of the crowd because He knows what they think about him and why they have come.

And we should take into account that those who had decided that even though they might not totally understand what Jesus was all about yet... the fact that he healed, delivered and forgave sins meant they would follow him and work with him – these disciples He publically acknowledged as his new "family"

So, I think you get the drift right... there are three decisions we can make about Jesus, and two of them aren't correct.

But what if we've already decided to get close to Jesus, to look to him for healing, deliverance and for forgiveness, to follow Him as extend His ministries to all those who need it.

Then friends this passage inspires us to urge those to whom we extend his ministry to consider who Jesus is and decide how they will respond to him.

Our tendency might be to give people time, to wait and allow them to build up a level of familiarity and comfort with us, with Jesus so that once they are comfortable enough they won't feel embarrassed or threatened and they will decide to become His followers.

And sometimes – that is a wise approach.

But friends, it can also be an excuse...and it's certainly not the approach with the gospel of Mark takes. We're only three chapters in to the story of Jesus – Mark is not waiting until it's done before He asks people if they are on board or not.

If Jesus has touched you in some way, Mark believes you've got enough experience to make up your mind about Him... and follow Him.

You see friends Mark was the first gospel written after Jesus ascended to Heaven and promised to return – and His disciples expected that to happen soon... consequently there was the real possibility you might not have the luxury of taking your time to

hum and haw about Jesus and make up your mind before He came back and it was too late.

There is an urgency to hurry up and decide... an urgency to help others hurry up and decide because we have no idea how long the window of opportunity to get in on the deliverance which Jesus offers will last...

We don't know when Jesus is coming back, all we're told is that we need to be ready for it, which means at the very least that people need to have made up their mind to turn to Him for healing, deliverance and forgiveness

To decide otherwise for whatever reason, as Jesus warns us – is by definition...unforgiveable.

But friends, the good news is that as long as it is today... the unforgiveable is forgivable – today we have the chance to decide to turn to Christ, to encourage everyone to turn to Christ... and have Him say to us “You – are my brothers, my sisters... welcome to my family!”

Amen.