

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Mark		Pastor/Teacher
Text	Mark 3:20-35		Mason Depew
Date:	October 11, 2026		

HOUSES DIVIDED AGAINST THEMSELVES

1. When we come to such a famously difficult text of Scripture like this one, about the unforgivable sin, we have to remember that it does not float in a vacuum. This is the same book, by the same author, that we have been reading up until now, and we must use what we know about Mark to understand what he means for us to learn here. So in this case, we need to pay special attention to the way he presents this account “sandwiched” in the middle of what first seems like an unrelated story. Why does Mark choose to bind this notorious passage about the unforgivable sin together with conflict between Jesus and his family? Answering this question is critical to understanding the unforgivable sin, and it follows a pattern that Mark uses throughout his gospel.
 - a. Mark frequently “sandwiches” difficult passages in between simpler ones that are all based around the same theme. For example, the sections about fasting, picking grain on the Sabbath, and healing on the Sabbath all showed the same basic idea: rituals of the Old Covenant are transformed by the coming of Israel’s Messiah. So if you want to know what it means that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath (the “meat” of the “sandwich”), you should look to the stories (the “pieces of bread”) both before and after to figure it out.
 - b. One of the best examples of this from later in Mark is when Jesus curses the fig tree. Countless people have wondered why Jesus was so angry at this tree when, as Mark notes, it was not even the season for figs!¹ On the surface it seems very petty and unfair to blame a tree for failing to produce fruit out of season. The real point, however, is revealed when you notice, in between his cursing and checking up on the tree, the cleansing of the Temple. There, the people are doing what comes naturally to them, buying and selling and changing foreign currencies for pilgrims. It’s all very convenient and “in season” from an earthly perspective, but the Temple is not supposed to be earthly. It is built on the pattern of the Tabernacle, which Moses based on heaven itself!² The Jews’ failure to grasp this shows that they are merely a natural people, like everyone else. They are no more spiritual or heavenly, in and of themselves, than the Romans, who often used their temples as actual banks!³ The transcendent gets shoved aside in favor of the pragmatic.

¹ “On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, ‘May no one ever eat fruit from you again.’ And his disciples heard it.” - Mark 11:12-14

² “They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’” - Hebrews 8:5

³ “The Temple of Artemis (the Artemesium) at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world for its size and beauty. The right of asylum for the temple was recognized by Augustus in 6 B.C. A temple of Rome and Julius Caesar, founded in 29, was united to the Artemesium in 5 B.C. Other cults were attached to the worship of Artemis, and in the second century A.D. a small sanctuary of

Likewise, the fig tree is just doing what fig trees do in their natural, fallen state, *and that's the problem!* A heavenly tree, worthy of the Messiah's work, would bear fruit all year round.⁴

- c. Likewise, here at the end of Mark 3, what these stories have in common is "houses divided against themselves," meaning really "families" that are fighting with themselves. Jesus's earthly family doesn't understand his mission, so they think he has gone mad and come to stop him by force if necessary. The scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, or the prince of demons (3:22), to which Jesus responds by pointing out it would be absurd for Satan to fight his own household servants (3:23-26). The unforgivable sin, also, is a kind of dividing of God's "household," by claiming that his own Spirit is opposed to him. This is what the scribes are really doing, although they do not realize it. This sin is unforgivable because it is incompatible with faith: the scribes are turning the self-revelation of God against himself when they claim that the works of the **Holy Spirit** are actually the works of an **unclean** spirit (3:30)! This would be like using the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple, as your bathroom.
 - i. To understand why Christ brings the Holy Spirit into this discussion when the scribes had not mentioned him, you must understand how the Holy Spirit worked in the Old Testament. In all of Israel's history, the Spirit appears most often as the one empowering Israel's anointed leaders, from Moses⁵ through the Judges,⁶ to King David.⁷ He represents a special degree of authority and empowerment that comes directly from God himself and demonstrates that God is leading his people through this particular mediator.
 - ii. With that in mind, you can see that the Spirit descending on Christ like a dove in Mark 1:10 is following this same pattern. The point is not that the Spirit had to cause Jesus to be born again, as we need him to do for us,⁸ but that he was anointing him to lead God's people. And as Jesus has been going around teaching and working miracles (far greater than the ones the Spirit worked through Samson, for example), we have seen again and again what large crowds of the Jews come to follow him! Earlier in this passage, we saw once again that the crowd is so large and so desperate for healing that they are pressing in on Jesus and seem almost

Isis appeared in the Artemisium. Moreover, **the temple was the banking and financial center for the province of Asia.**" - Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 325.

⁴ "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life **with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.** The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." - Revelation 22:1-2

⁵ "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And **I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.**'" - Numbers 11:16-17

⁶ "**Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah,** and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites." - Judges 11:29 "Then Samson went down with his father and mother to Timnah, and they came to the vineyards of Timnah. And behold, a young lion came toward him roaring. **Then the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him,** and although he had nothing in his hand, he tore the lion in pieces as one tears a young goat. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done." - Judges 14:5-6

⁷ "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. **And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward.**" - 1 Samuel 16:13

⁸ "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." - John 3:7-8

out of control.⁹ It is exactly the fruit of the Spirit's anointing that has made the scribes and the Pharisees jealous, wanting to destroy him.

- iii. Did Jesus, as the Son of God, have the power to work all these miracles himself? Of course he did! But the Spirit is with him at all times to continue that pattern of validating Israel's leaders, and also, unlike with Israel's other leaders, because the members of the Trinity never work apart from each other.¹⁰ Therefore, for the scribes to attack the works of Christ is not just an attack on Jesus the man, but on the whole Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- iv. You might naturally ask, then, why does Jesus focus on the offense against the Spirit rather than the other two Persons? I think John Owen suggests the best answer to this in his work, *Communion with God*. Throughout that book, Owen lays out the pattern of the Triune God's work through Scripture, so the first section is about the Father, the second about the Son, and the third about the Spirit. The Father is the distinct **origin** of all God's works, the Son is the **mediator**, and the Spirit is the one who **applies** them.¹¹ This is true in God's work of creation¹² just as much as in his work of redemption.¹³ Without the Father, nothing would have begun. Without the Son, nothing would be accomplished. Without the Spirit, we would remain blind and spiritually dead, unable to see and grasp the goodness of the good news. Therefore, Owen says that you have to understand the unforgivable sin as a rejection of the work of the Spirit as he focuses all of the Father and Son's saving work on particular people.¹⁴ To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to see this great flowing river of God's grace coming down out of heaven to earth and to say it is the opposite of what it is at the point *at which it is closest to you*.
- v. This river of life-giving water is exactly what the scribes are desperately trying to explain away. The Holy Spirit may be invisible, but all the proof that he is working in and through Jesus is right there as he casts out demons and heals the sick. If you turn your nose up at that and say the spirit who is doing these things is unclean, full of sin and death, then truly there is no helping you. Your heart is so hardened that you are like Pharaoh looking at those great huge walls of water and still charging into the heart of the sea. No one can say there weren't signs. You were warned, and you are going to face the consequences of your choices sooner or later. On the Day of Judgment, all kinds of other sins may be forgiven if you have faith, but this one cannot be pardoned, because it cannot coexist with faith. The Holy

⁹ "Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat." - Mark 3:20

¹⁰ This is why Augustine of Hippo said, preaching on John 5:19, "Understand, then, beloved brethren, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are inseparably united in themselves; that this Trinity is one God; that **all the works of the one God are the works of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.**"

¹¹ Throughout the book, Owen uses particular prepositions as a shorthand for this: all good things are *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and *by* the Holy Spirit.

¹² John 1:3 makes clear that all things, without exception, were made *through* the Son, which is a term that implies mediation. We also get a glimpse of the Spirit's role in Genesis 1:2, "hovering" over the face of the deep like a mother bird protecting and feeding her hatchlings. The same imagery is used again, later in Deuteronomy 32:11 for God's nourishing and sustaining care for Israel.

¹³ Consider the wonderful passage in Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul ascribes different aspects of our salvation to the Father (choosing us in love), the Son (redeeming us through his blood), and the Spirit (sealing our faith in the Gospel as the guarantee of our inheritance). Salvation originates from the Father, is mediated by the Son, and applied to us by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ "Certainly it [the unforgivable sin] must consist in the contempt of some aspect of his, as acting in the name and authority of the whole Trinity, and that in their ineffable condescension to **the work of grace.**" - Owen, *Communion with God* (Christian Heritage, 2007), 351.

Spirit, if he were dwelling in you, would not allow you to reject the Gospel so willfully.

2. With all this said, it is now also easier to understand why Jesus says what he says about his earthly family in Mark 3:31-35. When they come to him, seeking to put an end to his ministry, they show they are in danger of committing the same error as the scribes. Their unbelief is less overtly blasphemous, true, and they do not see themselves as overtly trying to harm Jesus like the Pharisees, but if this episode was all we knew about them we would have no reason to think they were redeemed. They do not appear to understand Jesus's mission or the Spirit's role in it any better than the crowd, at least.
 - a. I think the fact that the crowd is sitting at this point is significant, as it suggests they are more tame at this moment and willing to listen to his teaching, rather than pressing in and desperately trying to touch them so they can be healed. This would help explain why Jesus speaks more positively of the crowd here, as his true mother, brothers, and sisters who do the will of God.
 - b. Jesus emphasizes those who do "the will of God" are his family here so as to make it clear that it is not *merely* sitting by him that proves you are his family. You must actually submit to God in your heart of hearts to really *do* God's will. This does not mean that it is your actions which save you, but rather that those who really do God's will show the fruit of that faith which binds them to Christ. When children develop the same habits and interests as their parents, that doesn't *make* them family, but it *shows* powerful evidence that they are family. That is the point Jesus is making here: it is those who follow him and do the will of God who show themselves to actually have the Spirit working within them. They are not part of Beelzebul's household, but God's, and God's house is not divided against itself any more than Satan's is.
 - c. Why do Christians call each other brothers and sisters? It is because we have received the love of God the Father, through the grace of the Son, by the consolation of the Holy Spirit. This is the bond that unites and binds us together.¹⁵ It is also why you may feel closer and more at peace with fellow believers than with parts of your own earthly families, particularly if they are hostile to your faith. Several of the Apostle Paul's greetings reflect exactly this belief, such as in 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring." They show they are the household of God because they associate with other followers of Christ, even in the midst of persecution from Satan's household.
 - d. The question for you, then, is whose household are you a member of? Just as Jesus cannot be a member of Satan's household because he is binding Satan and plundering his house, you cannot be a member of God's household if you deny his Son and Spirit. By nature you are a child of Satan's household, but if you hold fast to Christ by faith then the Holy Spirit

¹⁵ "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." - Ephesians 4:4-7

has already led you out of that household to sit and learn at the feet of Jesus. You have already, as it were, been stolen away out of Satan's house when Christ bound him (3:27).¹⁶

- e. The final point that we come to, then, is that salvation is entirely God's work. From the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit we sinners are reconciled to the one, true, living, and holy God who cannot abide sin. This is the Gospel that Christ came to accomplish, and which he sent out his Apostles to proclaim.

¹⁶ This is also the way to understand the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-3, I believe. The fact that the Holy Spirit goes forth with such wonderful power to all corners of the world, bringing lost souls to faith in Christ, is the plundering of Satan's household that Jesus began in the Gospels. That requires him to be bound, so that he does not deceive people to nearly the same degree that he did before, when no one knew the Lord except in Israel.