

## Choose Wisely

Mark 3:20-30

Jim got off the elevator on the 40<sup>th</sup> floor and nervously knocked on his blind date's door. She was as beautiful and charming as everyone said she would be.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," she said. "Why don't you play with Rollo while you're waiting?" He's delightful. He's friendly. He rolls over, shakes hands, sits up and if you make a hoop with your arms, he'll jump through."

She disappeared into another room, and Rollo made his exuberant entrance. The dog followed Jim onto the balcony and proved to be as playful and friendly as advertised. After Rollo had performed every other trick, Jim made a hoop with his arms, and Rollo jumped through - right over the balcony railing. Jim slinked back into the apartment. Just then his date walked out.

"Isn't Rollo the cutest, happiest dog you've ever seen?" she asked.

"A little dog did come through here, he replied, but to tell the truth, he seemed a little depressed to me."

Does anyone take responsibility for their actions anymore? Jim and Rollo had a little mishap, but too many people today make deliberate choices and still take no responsibility for those choices. Choices bring consequences, and we are also responsible for those consequences. At least, we used to be. Recently, however, it seems that the daily news routinely includes at least one story that suggests that the ownership of personal responsibility for one's choices may be out of style.

In February of 2000, in Gary, Indiana, a man filed a lawsuit against Donald Trump, alleging that the reason he turned to bank robbery in 1998 and 1999 was his excessive debt. The floating Trump Casino in Gary fed his gambling addiction by enticing him to wager.

In March of the same year, a spokesman for a private prisoner-transport service in North Dakota told that legislature that the reason a convicted murderer and child molester escaped from the company's bus in 1999 was that prison officials failed to inform the company that he was an escape risk. The paperwork, said the company, showed only that he was serving a life sentence.

If Adam was around today, he might sue God for putting that enticing tree in the Garden in the first place without posting adequate signs or erecting a barrier. What's the legal term - "attractive nuisance"? That might fly in a courtroom somewhere. But, even if it remains an open question in our culture as to whether or not society should be required to protect people from the consequences of their own stupidity, it will never be an open question in God's Kingdom. He is not going to share any blame with you for your rebellion against Him. He can forgive it. By the blood of Jesus, He has shown that He desires to forgive it. But, He will never own your blame.

Jesus has been ministering in and about Capernaum for some time now. He has called twelve disciples. He has healed many diseases. He has driven out many demons. But, He has also begun to agitate powerful men by speaking and acting against their religious notions and by forgiving the sins of others on God's behalf. The die was now cast in such a way that people were being confronted with definitive choices about the identity of Jesus. Jesus had done enough so that any man could choose whether he believed Jesus to be from God, a nut or a manipulative fraud.

## **I. Irrefutable Divinity Is Dismissed (verses 20–22)**

<sup>20</sup>Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. <sup>21</sup>When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

<sup>22</sup>And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”

### **A. Jesus’ Family Believed that Pressure Had Broken His Mind**

A little religion is okay. Jesus’ healing gifts were indisputable. Still, He was going overboard. He had abandoned a stable trade to become a traveling preacher. He was saying provocative things about the kingdom of God. He picked some fishermen and the like, calling them, “His students”. One was a tax collector. One was a right-wing extremist, no doubt looking for a tax collector’s head for his mantel. Jesus was making powerful enemies. He was acting like a fanatic.

We don’t need to be too hard on Jesus’ family. After all, even ill-informed concern is concern. The demands of the crowds were always heavy. This day, Jesus wasn’t even able to catch a bite to eat, and if a man is not eating right, He is likely not sleeping right either. They were sure that Jesus was not taking care of Himself. When He tried to be alone, demanding crowds gathered, and He always honored their demands. Do not assume disrespect for Jesus by His kin. They seemed concerned. Stress can snap a man’s mind. Jesus appeared close to the breaking point.

Stress is a funny dynamic. In his book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, Charles Swindoll quotes David Taylor, a zoo veterinarian:

“Camels may build up a pressure cooker of resentment toward human beings until the lid suddenly blows off and they go berserk. In Asia, when a camel driver senses trouble, he gives his coat to the animal. Rather like Japanese workers reported to work off frustration by beating up models of their executives, the camel gives the garment hell – jumping on it, biting it, tearing it to pieces. When the camel feels it has blown its top enough, man and animal can live together in harmony again.”

Jesus’ family knew that blowing off steam so aggressively was not Jesus’ style - no punching the heavy bag, no drawing faces of Pharisees on golf balls and heading off to the driving range. Such options were not in His nature. The brothers were not believers, but to their credit, they knew that Jesus would keep giving and giving, even if giving appeared to be to His own peril.

### **B. Jesus’ Enemies Did Not Assess Him So Kindly**

These particular teachers of the Law were not objective onlookers. They had come all the way from Jerusalem, apparently, to scrutinize Jesus. They never actually undermined His miracles which spoke for themselves. People afflicted by demons were put right suddenly and completely. Their only option was to undermine Jesus Himself. They fussed when He worked miracles on the Sabbath. They complained that He often took it upon Himself to pronounce forgiveness of sins on people. Everyone knows that only God can forgive sins. But, was their hatred for Jesus really just about Law and theology? Do you not also detect a blindness driven by jealousy and rage?

For Jesus to be revered by the people, possibly even to the point of being proclaimed the *Messiah*, religious sorts like these Pharisees had to be minimized. Jesus was a commoner. He moved outside the clique of scribal expertise and pharisaic righteousness. He simply ignored and dismissed much of the ritual they thought was so important. The more He amazed the people, the more these men felt marginalized and deprived of the respect due them. In their eyes, there was only one way to reclaim that respect. They must publicly discredit Jesus. They must grasp for the ugliest, most unflattering slander out there. Their accusation was as desperate as it was wicked:

... "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

The origin of the name "Beelzebub" is disputed, but by Jesus' day, it was essentially a synonym for Satan. Jesus' family feared that He was mentally ill. The scribes called Him evil. Apart from simply believing in Jesus, those are really the only two options that remain. Some will try to number Jesus with other philosophers and moralists from history, but unless they simply dismiss the things He said, that is really not an option. C. S. Lewis' oft quoted words come to mind:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of thing Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse."

- *Mere Christianity*

## **II. Indisputable Lucidity Is Disclosed (verses 23-27)**

<sup>23</sup>So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? <sup>24</sup>If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup>If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. <sup>26</sup>And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. <sup>27</sup>In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.

### **A. Jesus Was No Nut, and that "Beelzebub Crack" Was Just Dumb**

If regaining lost standing in the eyes of the people by making Jesus look bad was the scribes' intention, they failed miserably. Their desperate accusation that Jesus drove out demons by the power of Beelzebub looked all the more pathetic when Jesus addressed it. His point was: "If Satan is aggressively working against his own demons, then his kingdom is in serious trouble.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. Monarchies that tend to survive are those which are passed down to one competent heir at a time. A royal might allot portions of his kingdom to a plurality of heirs, but without a sole sovereign, one king, the kingdom ceases to be, by definition, a kingdom. And, if one heir aspires to rule the whole, the former kingdom becomes a war zone. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Picture those old sitcoms where feuding roommates faction off space with tape on the floor. One cannot get to the bathroom without violating the boundaries. The other cannot retrieve to his bowling ball from the closet. The scenario is unworkable, which is precisely how Jesus intended for His accuser's accusations to appear.

Using the illogic of a divided kingdom or house, Jesus argues that He is not in league with Beelzebul and that the suggestion is silly. But, He does not stop there. He paints an even more vivid picture. He asks: “Who is going to march into the house of a big, bad bully and steal his stuff? One had better know that the big, bad bully is subdued. And, whoever dares to march in and tie up that big, bad bully must be pretty scrappy Himself.” What was Jesus really saying?

Who is it that can simply march onto Satan’s turf and take things away from Him? Who speaks a command to demons— not a series of chants and spells and incantations, but a Word – to the end that Satan’s henchmen scatter like rats? Who is strong enough to tie up the strong man?

## **B. The Lessons to these Parables Were in No Way Veiled**

It was obvious that Jesus was not working for Satan, and those who accused Him knew better. Theirs was a pathetic attempt to prop themselves up in the eyes of these people by undermining Jesus and His work. But, Jesus was saying more than that. He was claiming to be the One Who is stronger than the strong man. The fact that Jesus was divine was as irrefutable as the fact that He was not Satan. At some level, these men knew Jesus was casting out demons by God’s might.

The Jews believed that the only way to cast out a demon was to invoke the name of someone more powerful. When Jesus cast out demons, He didn’t invoke the name of His heavenly Father. He simply pushed the demons around by the authority of His own spoken Word. Jesus was greater than Satan. His was a greater Name. Jesus Himself was able to march onto Satan’s turf and reclaim men for the kingdom of God. He did so episodically by exorcising demons. One day He would do it definitively, once for all time, by dying on the cross and conquering the grave.

So, just in case the miracles themselves did not make matters crystal clear, the parables declared to the Pharisees in words that could not be missed, “I am He Who is stronger than Satan.”

## **III. Inexcusable Obstinacy Is Denounced (verses 28–30)**

... <sup>28</sup>I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. <sup>29</sup>But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

<sup>30</sup>He said this because they were saying, “He has an evil spirit.”

### **A. These Words May Have Sealed Jesus’ Fate**

When Peter caught a glimpse of the supernatural majesty of Jesus through one miraculous catch of fish, he was afraid, not because he thought he was in the presence of a demon, but because He knew He was in the presence of holiness. We know this because we know that his sense of personal sinfulness overwhelmed him, compelling him to say, “Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). That was the typical human response to the supernatural Christ.

In their stubborn blindness, these teachers of the Law could not deny Jesus’ supernatural might. They simply could not face the fact that He represented the side of the supernatural that they only pretended to understand. To have acknowledged that Jesus was from God would have cast a light on all their lies. They would have to acknowledge that they were the phonies He knew them to be.

Jesus boldly suggested that these men may be utterly without hope, but not because they lacked knowledge of the truth. They were without hope because when God made Himself known to them in Jesus, rather than turn to Him, they turned away, grasping at the most irrational straw out there. They called Him evil rather than bowing before His holiness. They condemned themselves because their hearts and minds were closed to Jesus, the only source of salvation for any of us.

I don't know if Jesus was accusing these men of having already committed the unpardonable sin, but at the very least, He was warning them that there *WAS* such a thing. Jesus' miracles served the purpose of testifying to His mission to save. These men were insulting the Holy Spirit, Who was clearly and vividly revealing Himself in the miracles of Jesus. How can there be any hope at all for a man so full of himself that he dares to call God in the flesh, "Satan in the flesh"?

### **B. These Words Have Wrongly Been a Source of Great Angst for Believers**

Two friends opened a butcher shop and did well. An evangelist came to town, and one of the butchers was saved. He tried to persuade his partner to accept salvation too, but to no avail.

"Why won't you, Charlie?" asked the born-again fellow.

"Lester," the other butcher said. "If I get religion, too, who's going to weigh the meat?"

I believe that the unpardonable sin is something like that. When God makes Himself and the Way of salvation clear to a man, and self-love prevails no matter what, that man *MUST* dismiss Jesus to protect his own sovereignty over his own heart. Such a man cannot be forgiven, because he is not rejecting what He does not understand, but what He strongly suspects must be true.

"This saying is an extremely serious warning against the demonic and scarcely conceivable potential in man: To declare war on God. This is not done in weakness and doubt, but by one who has been overcome by the Holy Spirit and who knows very well on whom he is declaring war" - E. Schweizer

It seems to me that the unpardonable sin is that settled, final and willful rejection of the Spirit's witness to Jesus. The Spirit's job is to bear witness to Jesus. He convicts a man of sin. He reveals to him that Jesus is the Way of salvation. When that man hardens his heart against that Witness and says, "No," he is in essence calling the Spirit a liar. When a person continually does this, his heart can become so hard that he can never recant. He misses the only salvation God offers.

When Jesus spoke of an unpardonable sin, He did not intend to terrify neurotic believers who struggle with their sins. I suspect that most believers struggle with particular sins. The world loves neurotic believers because it makes the Christian promise of hope and peace seem inauthentic. No, what Jesus had in mind with these words was much more provocative. This saying emerges from a base of religious exclusivity. Not only is Jesus the only Way to God, but when a man confronted with that truth often enough refuses to yield often enough, a resistance to repentance is built up. There is no salvation for him who rejects the only salvation God offers.

If you have ever been troubled by the thought that maybe you have committed the unforgivable sin, then stop it. It isn't the neurotic who is in danger here (though for the sake of your witness, you should learn to trust God more for your assurance). It is the steel-hearted, certain one who is in peril, who does not desire God's grace, but openly rejects it without pause. Only he who set himself against forgiveness is excluded from it. But, as for you and the vast balance of humanity, someone once said, "There is more grace in God's heart than there is sin in your past." If the Spirit has made it clear to you that Jesus is the Way to life, then choose now, and choose wisely.