

Jesus Answers His Opponents

Mark 3:20-35

Jesus reaches down this morning to draw his immovable line in the sand. It is an unalterable boundary.

Perhaps you have been to the quadripoint in the Southwest, where you can place your foot in four states at the same time. This line is no quadripoint. You must place your foot on one side or the other—with Jesus, or against him.

You cannot stand still on the bridge between the positions. That is the wonderful and horrible message of Jesus. He offers nothing less than eternal life, but demands nothing less than your complete commitment.

You may hold a harmless opinion in other matters: your preferred football team means very little, in the end. What climate do you like most? Choose a season, it matters hardly at all.

But in this matter there is no neutral opinion. Are you for Jesus, or are you against him? There is no middle ground, and the side which holds your foot will be a joy or terror to your memory into the numberless ages, world without end.

In Mark chapter 3, we find men and women on either side of the line. A crowd has gathered again around this popular figure, Jesus of Nazareth. The house can be no fuller than it is, there is a muffled heat among the many bodies, a low odor too, all day the people have pressed in to touch and see, and now all eyes are fixed, all ears are reaching over the populous murmurs and shuffles, to hear this abnormality, this Rabbi with power and powerful teaching.

And since our fates are identical to that of this crowd, since we too must face Jesus now and choose our side, why don't we put ourselves among them?

It is imagination, but only the place and time must be imagined. The demands have not changed, the line yet rests across the ground, the Rabbi still speaks.

Are you for him, or against him?

MARK 3:20-35

And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses." The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.

"Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"-- because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."

We have here a story within a story. The first verses speak, apparently, of Jesus' family, his own people. From Nazareth it seems that they hear of the crowds, that Jesus and his disciples cannot even eat. And so they assume he has lost his senses, and begin to travel down from Nazareth to Capernaum, where Jesus is, presumably, staying, in the house from chapter one, that of the disciples Simon Peter and Andrew.

As the family travels down to recapture their wayward son, stronger opposition appears. And it is this opposition from the scribes that we will consider first and mainly, and at the end we will briefly return to the family to conclude.

Against Jesus

Here then you are, among the crowd—before you sits Jesus, calling you to come and give your life to him. But there is a reason not to.

Behind you are the rumors, spreading from the Jerusalem scribes, the official teachers of Judaism. These are the elite of the religious establishment, so what they say matters.

And they all agree: Jesus is a pawn of the devil. He casts out demons, true, but only by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons—that is, the devil. And why not? Satan was a liar from the beginning—perhaps then Jesus can cast out demons only because the head of the demons has temporarily empowered him to accomplish the task. Doesn't the devil disguise himself as an angel of light? "Well," say the scribes, "here he has disguised himself as a Rabbi of light."

If you are against Jesus, you are unreasonable

There are as many arguments against Jesus today, as many rumors floating among the crowds, as then—and more. And we cannot ignore the arguments. There are, in fact, false teachers in the world.

More than that, there are whole false systems of thought. Muhammad claims a message from God, and so does Joseph Smith. And so does Jesus. The teacher who sits before us now is, to our eyes, a man, and he is making a claim and is making a demand. His claim is that he has come from God, his demand is that you cross the line completely to his side.

What we want to know is this: Do I have a reason to believe that man and cross that line? And what I want to argue is that if you do not cross that line, you are being unreasonable. You are not thinking.

The logic

Listen to how Jesus defends himself from the rumors, then we will consider modern rumors. After calling the rumor-making scribes to himself, he says, verse 23, “How can Satan cast out Satan?”

Follow the logic closely. Jesus is giving you reason to cross the line, he is debunking those who contradict with this particular line of argumentation. This is for thinking people.

“How can Satan cast out Satan?” We read that Jesus is speaking in a parable, not because he is giving them a story, but because he is *illustrating* for them why their objection is groundless, using first a question. And it is a rhetorical question. Jesus does not say: “Satan does not cast out Satan.” No, he draws you into the conversation, he is trying to get you to think and to see that you in fact agree with him.

So the question is, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” And you must nod your head and say, “Well, I see, Satan would not cast himself out, now would he.”

Satan is the head of the demons, the very demons whom Jesus has been casting out of people. Already in Mark we have witnessed Jesus wrestling with the powers of darkness, undoing the works of the devil and his kingdom. Do you think Satan, whose wellbeing depends in part upon his assisting forces, would be destroying them file by file.

“But,” you argue, “perhaps the devil has allowed this man to cast out a few demons, has sacrificed a few of his soldiers, so to speak, in order to trick people into following him.”

Let me ask you this: Would the U.S. have bombed Pearl Harbor? Would Japan have dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Jesus was not casting out a few demons, but many of them. Would Satan devastate his own forces? That is unreasonable.

See it continued, verses 24 and 25: “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” And the natural conclusion: “If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!”

I cannot think of any war in which the generals incited their men against each other for some strategic end. Once you start the fire, the wind will catch it and your fields will be gone, finished. It is not uncommon for

one country to provoke a rebellion or civil war in an opposing country, but never in itself.

Jesus argues on the basis of Satan's craftiness. The scribes argue, "The devil is subtle, he is trying to trick you by empowering this false teacher, by casting out his own demons." Ah, so the devil is crafty? Then why do you claim that he acts so foolishly, biting off his own tail?

Here is a more reasonable explanation of the phenomena, verse 27: "But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house."

An attack from the outside is the simple and unbiased fact, observable from the evidence. The demons were ripped out of their victims not by the power of the devil, but despite the power of the devil. The demons were not part of a stage play when they trembled before their better, when one by one they were forced to flee.

Their captain, the devil, was tied and set in the corner of the house, and Jesus was now plundering his goods. He was releasing the captives, setting free those who were oppressed, and proclaiming the favorable year of the LORD.

You have lost your senses!

You, sitting there among the throng, must deal with the same data. You have not seen Jesus pull a demon out of a man, but you have seen him pull the evil out of him. You must give some explanation for the transformed lives of those who have crossed the line.

Let us begin at the beginning. Last week we saw Jesus choose his twelve apostles: fishermen and insignificant Galileans. When Jesus left, they all caught afire with this message, saying that Jesus was true and had risen from the dead—all but one were put to death, refusing to loosen their grip on their claim, despising their lives even unto death. The prominence of Christianity across the world today is a proof of their absolute transformation.

"But," you say, "Muslims are as adamant. They too will die for their faith." Yes, but will they die to themselves? Those who have crossed the line to Jesus lay down the world's weapons, give up the power struggle, deny their own desires, and give their lives not to kill, but to help others. I can easily explain a religious fanaticism that incites men to kill. But how do you explain one that makes a killer love his neighbor?

There is the logic. That is but one reason to cross the line, and there are many others. But if you can hear this one and stay comfortably seated on the wrong side of the line, I might say what Jesus' family said of him: "You have lost your senses!" You are not being sensible.

If you are against Jesus, you are in danger

Following the words of Jesus on, we see the seriousness of the matter before us. If you are against Jesus, you are unreasonable—but that is not all. If you are against Jesus, you are also in danger.

Here is Jesus' warning, and it is perhaps the bleakest and most hideous of all he ever gave. Verses 28-29: "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin."

To the comfortable

I will be honest—I do not know what the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is. I know the meaning of the words: blasphemy is a "speaking against," a slandering. The scribes were given this warning because they were slandering the Spirit by whom Jesus exorcised demons, spewing out the nonsense that he was Beelzebul.

So by that bare definition, the scribes are guilty of an eternal sin! Yet why then has Jesus called them to himself to warn them? Have they drawn near to such a blasphemy and are standing right on the verge of it? Is there a degree of blasphemy that someone must reach before he is condemned?

I don't know. But I do know this: the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is something.

Ah, and it is only one of many steaming, gaping pits which cover the whole ground on the side of the line opposite Jesus. There you are, seated at a distance, listening to Jesus—you may sink into hell within the very sound of his voice. The only safety is to cross the line. All those who are for Jesus receive the benefits of his blood. Their guilt is covered, their sins removed and placed upon the crucified Savior. They cannot be guilty of an eternal sin.

But on the other side of the line there is no guarantee. You may muse for years upon the meaning of this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and then fall into a wholly different demise.

Fear, fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell—fear him! How do you know that you will not tonight fall under this very condemnation? You have no guarantee of safety until you cross the line. Yes, use your mind and think, I have given you reasons, but do not reason your way into an unquenchable fire that cannot be undone.

To the miserable

We have been considering the unreasonableness and the danger of being *against* Christ. Before we turn to see the pleasures of being *for* him, I need to pause and speak specifically to a few. If this aside does not concern you, wait a moment and I will return to you.

But there is a word of comfort that needs to be spoken here, and I hope God will apply it to some poor and suffering Christian, even if it is only to one of you.

You may be a true disciple of Jesus Christ who thinks you have committed this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. You have crossed over to Jesus and you love him in truth. But you are of such a temperament that your mind moves too quickly for itself.

I can remember a time in my own life when I feared lying in bed to fall asleep, because my mind, or a demon, or perhaps both, would drive me by some dreaded impulse toward what I thought was blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. I did not want to do it, but once the mere thought of it had entered my head I could not seem to get it out.

John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, wrestled with this impulse for years. He had truly trusted into Christ, yet very randomly this thought would pop into his mind: "Sell Christ." Sometimes it would race through his head a hundred times in a row, "Sell him, sell him, sell him..."

It was paralyzing. At times he would literally wave his hands, as if in battle, and retaliate against himself: "Sell him; I will not, I will not, I will not, I will not; no, not for thousands, thousands, thousands of worlds." Then one day he felt as if his heart, in a moment of weakness, consented to the notion, "Let him go, if he will." And he came to think he had somehow blasphemed the Holy Spirit.

There is a kind of mind that will latch onto this passage and not let it go. It is a kind of mind bent on condemning itself. And you may be Christ's in truth, and yet fear that you have committed this error, and so lose all peace.

Grant me just a few words of comfort.

First, remember that it is not the mere recital of the words that makes one guilty. If that were so, then my reading the passage to you this morning would subject me to eternal punishment. This is a sin of the heart, not merely of the lips or mind.

Second, and perhaps most helpfully, if you fear that you have committed this blasphemy, then you have not. Note the scribes—they do not care that they have spoken so flippantly, that they are near to perdition. You are more like the demon-possessed in these stories than like the scribes. You are tormented by your thoughts; you love Christ, but are overtaken by an odd impulse. If you are lost forever, then why do you evince any of the grace of God, such that you are sorrowful about your sin, sensitive to the word of God, and so forth?

Third, trust in the kind heart of Jesus Christ. Yes, throw all your desperate weight there. In reading the 29th verse, do not neglect the 28th: “Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter.” It is not Christ’s aim to catch you in a mechanical snare as you are pushing through the crowd to get to him. “Come to me,” he says, and he means it. Let this be your epitaph: “On Thy kind arms I fall.”

For Jesus

I have reserved the final paragraph of our passage for this brief conclusion. But it fits well here. You have seen what it is to be against Jesus, unreasonable and dangerous.

If you are for Jesus, you are family

But if God by those reasons does not *push* you across the line to his beloved Son, then I hope by this one final fact he might *pull* you across.

What is it to be *for* Jesus? Well, we find out when Jesus’ family finally arrive from Nazareth. Beginning in verse 31:

Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You.” Answering them, He said, “Who are My mother and My brothers?” Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, “Behold My

mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

His family thought him out of his mind and came to get him. Yet Jesus was in his right mind—he was doing what he had come to do. He was calling people to himself.

To cross the line, to come helpless across to Jesus, as a beggar in need of bread—to throw your lot in with him, to trust him alone for your salvation, to go “all in,” so to speak, which is the will of God—is to become family.

Yes, you will lose everything behind you. Maybe your family will say of you, “He has lost his senses!” or “She has lost her senses!” Maybe people will say you are possessed by the demon of religious fanaticism.

But you will gain Christ as a brother, closer to you than any other.

Ah, if you have never known what it is for Jesus’ eyes to linger on you, and for him to say, “Behold, my mother,” or “Behold, my brother,” or “Behold, my sister;” for him to look down from his cross and say, “For you, my friend and follower;” I hardly know what to say to you. Why do you wait any longer?

You, you there, among the crowds, now is the moment when I must ask you and you must ask yourself. Where do you set your foot? What side of the line is yours? Are you *against* this Jesus, or will you be *for* him?