

## **“Too Familiar with Jesus?”**

*Mark 3:7-35*

October 10, 2010

I want to begin this morning by giving you an assignment. Are you ready for that? There are two parts to this assignment. Here's the first part: Describe Jesus in a concise but meaningful way.

What is the first thing that goes through your mind when you hear that assignment? Who is Jesus? Well, he's the Son of God. He's the Savior. He is also the Lord. Jesus is also called the Prince of Peace. And he is loving too. Those are good and concise descriptions of Jesus.

If those are the answers that you hand in to me for your assignment, you'll flunk! It's not that they are wrong. They're just too easy! I want you to use your own words to describe Jesus. Don't just repeat the same old things that you've heard for years. I want you to think for yourself. How would you describe Jesus in your own terms?

Here's the second part of your homework assignment: Describe how Jesus wants people to respond to him.

What goes through your mind? Jesus wants people to accept him. Or, as we often say, he wants people to invite him into their hearts. Jesus wants people to put their faith in him or trust him as their Lord and Savior.

Sorry! Once again you are going to get an F for those answers. Again it is not that they are wrong. Those answers are too easy! Put it into your own words. How does Jesus want people to respond to him?

The problem is that most of us here today are too familiar with Jesus. We've heard the stories of Jesus too often. We've learned the Bible stories too well. Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not against reading the Bible or learning about Jesus. There is nothing that can replace reading God's Word when it comes to growing in our walk with God. My point is that our familiarity with Jesus sometimes blinds us to seeing him for who he really is. It's too easy to repeat the familiar formulas. We fall back into using evangelical clichés. We need to be shocked by Jesus!

That's why in our study of the New Testament book of Mark I've suggested that we try to imagine ourselves as part of the first group of people who ever heard Mark's scroll being read. Imagine yourself living back in the early 50s of the first century. That's when I think that the scroll that we call the Gospel of Mark was written. You are living in the city of Rome, and you are what is called a God-fearer (Acts 10:2; 13:16, 26). That means that you are a Gentile. You're not Jewish. But there is something about the religion of the Jews that intrigues you. So you go to the synagogue every now and then, and recently you've heard a few things there about a man named Jesus. Everybody is intrigued by this Jesus. Some people actually think that he is the Jewish Messiah. Others aren't so sure. And now a scroll about Jesus has just arrived in the city, and it is being read out loud at the synagogue.

Can you imagine yourself in that situation? As you listen to the scroll written by Mark being read, what are your first impressions of this Jesus? Suppose you've just heard read what we call Mark 3:7-35. What comes across and lodges in your mind?

## The Attraction

When you hear that passage of the scroll being read, one of things that you can't help but notice is the attraction. People are attracted to Jesus. It's like they can't ignore him.

<sup>8</sup> When they heard all he was doing, *many people came to him* from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. <sup>9</sup> Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, *to keep the people from crowding him*. <sup>10</sup> For he had healed many, so that those with diseases *were pushing forward to touch him*. (Mark 3:8-10 emphasis added)

Mark uses some geographical terms there that probably don't mean much to us, but they cover a large slice of land. From Idumea in the south to Sidon in the north is about 160 miles. People are walking long distances to see Jesus. And when they locate him, they crowd in around him and are constantly sticking out their hands to touch him.

Can you imagine what that's like? Have you ever seen pictures of the paparazzi following a celebrity around? Whatever that celebrity is doing, someone is there taking a picture. It drives the celebrities crazy. Have you ever been to a sporting event or a concert where you have found yourself in a huge crowd? Everybody is pressing in on you from all sides. I remember going to Bangladesh years ago and walking through a marketplace. Beggars were constantly coming up to us and touching us and asking for money. No matter how fast we walked or how much we tried to ignore them there was no escape.

That's what's happening with Jesus. People just keep coming to him and touching him. The only way he can escape is to get into a boat and push off from the shore. Verse 20 says, "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat" (Mark 3:20). Jesus can't even sit down with his disciples and enjoy a meal in peace! Verse 21 indicates that his family comes to find out what is going on. And verse 22 says, "And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem . . ." It's not just the sick who are coming to him with the hope of being healed. The religious leaders are walking all the way from Jerusalem up to the Sea of Galilee to check Jesus out. That's a hike of some 80 miles! There is something about Jesus that people just cannot resist.

I find that's still true today. Here in America most people seem to think that Jesus is somehow on their side. And most social and political causes seem to claim that Jesus is on their side. Even when that is not true, people still have an opinion about him. The point is that nobody totally ignores Jesus. Have you noticed that? Here we are 2000 years after Jesus walked along the roads of Galilee, and there is still something about Jesus that attracts people's attention.

## The Response

But it is more than just attraction. Jesus is more than an ancient celebrity surrounded by annoying paparazzi and gawking fans. People inevitably make a response to Jesus. They make a decision about Jesus. Even his own family evaluates him.

<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." (Mark 3:21)

Isn't that an amazing comment? His own family thought that he was crazy!

One of the things that intrigues me about Mark 3:21 is that there is no parallel to it in the Gospels of Matthew or Luke. Those two men wrote their accounts after Mark wrote his scroll, and they evidently used Mark's scroll as one of their historical resources for their books (Luke

1:1-4). So why did they leave out this incident in which Jesus' family thought that he was crazy? Did they think that maybe it would give some people the wrong impression about Jesus? If your own family thinks you are crazy, what are other people who don't know you as well supposed to think? I don't know the answer, but I plan on asking Matthew and Luke about that when I meet them in heaven!

I don't find that many people today write Jesus off as crazy, but I do find that a lot of people have the attitude that they don't have to take Jesus seriously. Jesus is a nice person to talk about when you're in church on Sundays. But the rest of the week he can pretty much be ignored. You don't have to take Jesus seriously Monday through Saturday. Jesus is an extra. He's a religious luxury for people who have nothing better to do with their time. Do you know of people who treat Jesus that way? He's a nice hobby, but don't get too wrapped up in him. He's not worth that much attention. You certainly wouldn't want to change your life because of him!

That's one response. Look at another one. Mark goes on in his scroll to describe how those religious leaders who have made the trek from Jerusalem up to the Sea of Galilee respond to Jesus. They take a much harsher approach to Jesus than his family does. Jesus is not just crazy.

<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." (Mark 3:22)

These teachers of the law do take Jesus seriously. Let's give them credit for that. They don't just dismiss him as crazy like his family does. No, Jesus is far more than crazy. He's dangerous! He's working for the devil!

Jesus responds to them in two ways. First, he shows how unreasonable that response is. It doesn't make any sense if you stop and think about it.

<sup>23</sup> So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak 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." (Mark 3:23-26)

By this time in his ministry Jesus has again and again cast out demons. He's got a track record of working against the devil. So how could anybody reasonably suggest that he is working for the devil? That is an uncalled for and irrational evaluation.

That's the first part of what Jesus says to the teachers of the law. Now he says something far more serious.

<sup>28</sup> "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven all their sins and all the blasphemies they utter. <sup>29</sup> But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:28-29)

There is Jesus' famous statement about what is usually called "the unforgivable sin." That is a subject that is worthy of study all by itself. (See the attached study at the end of this sermon.) For our purposes this morning let's be content with noting that Jesus is leveling a serious charge against the religious leaders. Whatever precisely he means by what he says, it is clear that he is not saying something to pacify these leaders. Instead he looks them right in the face and, in effect, says, "You're dead wrong! You are guilty of an eternal sin because you have rejected me!"

Some people respond to Jesus that way. Some respond like his family did. They dismiss him as someone that doesn't need to be taken seriously. Others reject him outright like the religious leaders from Jerusalem. Here in Mark 3 we witness both of those responses.

There is also a third response. Let's be sure that we take note of this one. This response is positive. But it is probably not quite the one that you and I expect.

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

<sup>33</sup> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

<sup>34</sup> Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35)

What do you think of what Jesus says in those verses? At the very least, isn't he a little rude?

Is this any way to treat your mother? But more than that, does Jesus say what you expect him to say? Shouldn't Jesus have given a more standard evangelical-Christian-kind-of-answer? Shouldn't Jesus have said something like, "Whoever has invited me into their heart is my brother and sister and mother. Whoever has prayed the sinner's prayer is my brother and sister and mother." OK, maybe that's asking too much. But shouldn't Jesus have said something about faith and trusting in him? Instead of talking about faith he talks about *doing* God's will. Later on in Mark's scroll we will read what Jesus has to say about faith. But right here he is talking about obedience! Jesus says that those who respond to him by *doing* God's will are not just his followers but are his family.

### Conclusion

Let's return to the assignments that I gave you at the beginning of this sermon. How can you and I concisely and meaningfully describe Jesus and how we should respond to him?

Several years ago I decided on four adjectives to describe Jesus. Maybe you can improve on my summary of Jesus, but they are the best that I have come up with so far. First, Jesus was *original*. There was absolutely no one like him. Second, he was *striking*. People were drawn to him. They always wanted to know more about Jesus. Third, he was *baffling*. No one ever quite figured him out. There was always something about him that was beyond people's ability to grasp. And fourth, he was *compelling*. People always made a decision about Jesus. They had to respond in one way or another. Some opposed him and hated him. Others loved him and followed him. But everybody made some kind of decision about Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

What kind of response did Jesus want people to make about him? I'd summarize it this way. Jesus presented himself as someone around whom all of life and history ultimately revolves. The decision that he wanted from his followers in the first century is the same one that he looks for in you and me. Are you and I willing to say, "Jesus, I want you to be at the center of my life and existence. Jesus, I want to be one of those you gladly identify as your brother and sister and mother. I want everything that I believe and say and do to revolve not around my desires and hopes but around you and your will."

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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<sup>1</sup> My chosen adjectives are not entirely original. My conclusions came largely from C.F.D. Moule's *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), in which he writes on page 156, "The general effect of these several more or less impressionistic portraits is to convey a total conception of a personality striking, original, baffling, yet illuminating."

## What is the Unforgivable Sin?

One of Jesus' most puzzling and troubling statements concerns what is commonly referred to as the unforgivable sin.

<sup>30</sup> "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, people will be forgiven every sin and blasphemy. But blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." (Matt. 12:30-32)

<sup>28</sup> "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven all their sins and all the blasphemies they utter. <sup>29</sup> But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin." (Mark 3:28-29)

<sup>10</sup> "And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." (Luke 12:10)

After reading those passages, the thoughtful reader cannot help but ask what exactly Jesus is talking about. And we also naturally wonder if it is possible that we have ever committed the unforgivable sin.

### The Context

To understand Jesus' teaching we need to consider three factors.

First, we should examine the historical context in which Jesus gives this teaching. In Matthew 12:22-37, Jesus is caught up in an intense confrontation with his most bitter and unrelenting enemies, the Pharisees. They are not just questioning him or even disagreeing with him. They are accusing him of actually being in league with Beelzebul, the Devil. "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" (Matt. 12:24b). The Pharisees are accusing Jesus of being an enemy of God.

Second, why does Jesus draw a distinction between himself and the Holy Spirit? Is he saying that it is acceptable to curse him but not the Holy Spirit? Keep in mind that at this time in history "the Holy Spirit" is another way of referring to God himself. It is only later on that the disciples understand that God the Holy Spirit can be distinguished from God the Father and God the Son. (See Matthew 28:19; 1 Cor. 13:14.)

Third, at this point in history Jesus is in the process of showing who he truly is. The people are trying to figure out exactly who he is and what he is doing. Even his disciples don't understand Jesus at this point in his ministry. So it is not surprising that others do not understand him either.

Here's an expanded paraphrase of Matthew 12:27: "Anyone who speaks a word against me at this particular time will be forgiven because I have not completed my ministry, and it is understandable that people might be confused. But anyone who can look at all the miracles that I have performed and say that God has nothing to do with those miracles but that they actually come from the Devil himself—that person is so spiritually perverse that he or she is beyond the point where forgiveness will ever be of any interest."

The unforgivable sin is best understood as a complete and unrelenting rejection of Jesus. It is not doubt about God or momentary disappointment with God or even anger at God. We find examples in the book of Psalms of people who are upset with God (Ps. 89), but there is

no hint in the Psalms that God will not forgive those people. The unforgivable sin is a decisive and persistent rejection of Jesus.

### The Application

How does this teaching apply to people today? We are not in the same situation as the Pharisees were in Matthew 12 because we know more about Jesus than they or the early disciples did. We know about his crucifixion and his resurrection. People today should not be as confused about who Jesus is and what he came to do. But today it is still possible to follow the example of the Pharisees in opposing Jesus. The unforgivable sin today is a decisive and persistent rejection of Jesus.

That leads to an important and immensely practical insight. *If you or I are worried that we may have committed the unforgivable sin, then we can be assured that we have not committed the unforgivable sin.*

People who are completely and unrelentingly in opposition to Jesus Christ don't worry about whether they are committing the unforgivable sin. They have rejected Jesus so decisively and so permanently that they never think about sin at all. Their consciences are so seared and hardened that they don't care what God thinks of them. They do not even think about God except to renew their hatred of him. If you or I are worried that we may have committed the unforgivable sin, it is a good sign that our hearts are still open to God's work. It is a good sign that we have not committed the unforgivable sin.

The Bible as a whole teaches us that God is extravagant in his willingness to forgive (Psalm 65:3; 86:5; 103:8-12; 130:3-4; Isaiah 1:8; Micah 7:18-19; 1 Timothy 1:13-16). That doesn't mean that we should take sin lightly and act as if God does not care what we do in this life. The Bible teaches us that sin is serious. But when we confess our sins, turn away from the way that we have been living, and place our trust in Jesus, then God is more than willing to forgive us for everything that we've done wrong. In the words of Micah, God "delights to show mercy" (Micah 7:18)!

In the Bible we never find an example of someone crying out to God for forgiveness and being denied it. God does not turn people away when they confess their sins and ask for forgiveness through Christ. God is extravagant in his love. If you and I persist in our rejection of Jesus Christ, then we need to take warning. There will be a time of judgment. But if we confess our sins and turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, there is forgiveness. Thank God for his extravagant love!