

CS Lewis once said this:

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I am ready to accept Jesus as the great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things 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. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Whether or not Lewis had our passage in mind when he wrote that, it does seem to fit rather well. Jesus was causing a stir. He's teaching as if he himself had authority, that did not come from scripture. He's healing the sick, casting out demons, forgiving sins, calling people to be his followers. Who did people think he

was? Certainly not just a ‘great moral teacher’.

The crowds hoped he was the Messiah; his family thought him mad, dangerously insane; the religious teachers thought him evil. I wonder who you think Jesus is? A madman? Evil? God?

## **Introduction**

Our passage today begins after Jesus calls twelve ‘official’ followers, from the crowds that trail after him everywhere he goes. Although they didn’t know it at the time, these men were to found the largest movement the world has ever seen. For now, Jesus employed them as his crowd managers.

These poor men were plunged right in at the deep end. Jesus took them back to his place, in Capernaum. He was extremely popular there, as we’ve seen before – and, yet again, a large crowd assembles at his house. There were so many people there that Jesus and his new disciples were unable even to eat. They didn’t have time – Jesus was, presumably, healing the sick and teaching the people. They probably couldn’t get out of the house to find food anyway, with all the people crowding round it.

These crowds clearly thought him more than a great moral

teacher. But what, then? We are now going to look at the passage in three sections, or scenes.

## Scene 1

Like a modern-day film director, Mark cuts to a scene back in Jesus' old hometown Nazareth. Jesus' family are being told some gossip about what he's up to these days. Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus' family heard, but no doubt it was something along these lines: 'Have you heard, he's forgiving sins now? Yes, this poor man was lowered through the roof...' 'He's healing people on the Sabbath now, you know...'

They drew the obvious conclusion: he can't possibly be serious, forgiving sins, saying he's the Lord of the Sabbath. But he can't be *evil*, he's our brother – he must be *mad*. Not eccentric, but *insane*, out of his mind, totally off his rocker. Five loaves and two fish short of a picnic. Mad enough to be a danger to himself and other people.

So they did what any loving family would – they set out to restrain him, to stop things getting any worse.

And so Mark cuts back to Capernaum, where the scribes from

Jerusalem are taking things a few stages further. They recognised that Jesus really did have power from somewhere. He couldn't simply be mad, because he really was healing people, he really was casting out demons. But he was challenging them, going against their laws – so he couldn't be from God. He must be *evil*. These theologians, these religious teachers whose job it was to study the scriptures, gave their not-so-humble opinion that Jesus 'had Beelzebul'.

'Beelzebul' is not normally a name given to the devil. It means 'lord of the flies', or sometimes 'lord of the dwelling'. It usually refers to a lesser demon. However here it's quite clear that the scribes are saying Jesus is possessed by the devil himself: 'by the ruler of demons he casts out demons,' they say.

Both Jesus' family and the scribes heard about what Jesus was saying and doing, what he was teaching and claiming, directly or indirectly. They couldn't simply ignore what he was saying; it was quite clear to everyone that he was most definitely *not* harmless. They didn't think he was just a 'great moral teacher'. No-one did at the time. It's a modern conceit to call Jesus a 'great moral teacher', devised to rob him of his real power and challenge, so people can pat him on the head and not bother to find out who he really is.

The people around Jesus were left Lewis' three options: mad, bad or God. His family took the first, the scribes the second.

## Scene 2

In the next mini-scene, Jesus responds to the scribes. He couldn't let their challenge go unanswered. So he called them to him, and spoke to them in *parables*.

This is the first mention of *parables* in Mark. Jesus has been teaching before, but not explicitly in parables. So what are they? They are often metaphors – but you, the listener, have to work out for what. Fundamentally, they're stories with two levels of meaning: 'the story level provides a mirror by which reality is perceived and understood. In effect, parables are imaginary gardens with real toads in them.' They are a way of looking at the real world, through our imagination, and they are usually extremely effective.

Jesus was big on parables; we have at least forty on record, which is about a third of all his teaching. They help us to understand reality, but should never be taken too literally.

And so Jesus begins his reply to the scribes: 'How can Satan cast

out Satan? It makes no sense,' he says, 'and here's why.' A country at war with itself will be destroyed from the inside-out. To put it another way, if family members fight, divided against each other, that family will disintegrate, its relationships fall apart.

Jesus then explains the parable. All demons belong to one family, one household. And the devil – Satan, Beelzebul, the 'lord of the dwelling' – is the head of that family. If he is using his power against his own demons, then his time has come – he cannot stand. He will be destroyed, and it will be of his own making.

The irony is of course, that Satan's end *has* come, but not of his own making. In the final part of this second scene, Jesus explains something about his mission to them.

A strong man can resist all assaults – except one from a stronger man. If I were to challenge the world's heavyweight boxing champion, people would probably laugh. But if I fought him, and beat him, I would prove myself to be the stronger man. In fact, I could only *prove* myself the stronger man *if* I faced the strong man, and *beat* him.

So what is Jesus talking about? Is he talking about Good Friday? The answer has to be no, although the shadow of the cross does

fall across most of Mark's gospel. The battle Jesus is referring to here was a precursor to the battle at Golgotha, the first recorded showdown between Jesus and the devil: his temptation in the wilderness. Up to that point in time the 'strong man' of the world was the devil. He had beaten every single person, bar none, many times over.

And so along came Jesus. After his baptism and its spiritual high, the Holy Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness – not led, or prodded, but *drove*, as Jesus would later drive the money-lenders out of the temple with a whip. It was a violent action – the Spirit forced Jesus into the desert for his time of testing and temptation.

The temptations Jesus faced mirrored those of Israel in the wilderness, just as his forty days mirrored their forty years. But unlike them he resisted the devil. More than that, he beat him back, having the last word each time. He showed himself to be the stronger man, doing what no-one else could do.

The devil was 'tied up', bound by Jesus' faithfulness to his Father and the strength he drew from scripture; Jesus had earned the authority, the 'right', to 'plunder the strong man's property': he healed the sick, cast out demons, forgave sins, announced and inaugurated the coming kingdom of God.

The devil's end has indeed come – but through the external assault of the Father's power in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, and not through civil war, as the scribes implied.

### Scene 3

The final mini-‘scene’ follows hot on the heels of the last. Having shown they are wrong, Jesus now shows them just how wrong they are. This part of the gospel-story is almost infamous for causing countless Christians through the ages great difficulty. How can there be an ‘eternal sin’, from which there can be no forgiveness? And yet Jesus begins the statement, ‘Truly I tell you,’ – a formula often repeated in the gospels, and which flags up for the reader that what he is about to say is important, serious, and absolutely true. The parable ended in verse 27.

But it still doesn't seem right. Surely, whatever we do, we can receive forgiveness from God if we repent? That is absolutely true as well; in fact, it's precisely the point: *if we repent*. Let's see *exactly* what Jesus is talking about, what the ‘eternal sin’ might be.

Well, it certainly isn't asking questions. Many of Jesus' teachings were a direct result of questions he'd been asked, often by his disciples. And it isn't doubting either. Think about poor old



Thomas, who doubted but then believed. Or Peter, walking on water and then doubting – but Jesus caught him. Doubt is part of faith in this life, until we see Jesus at last face-to-face.

It isn't a lack of understanding either. The gospels are first a record of Jesus' life, but second a record of how badly people misunderstood it. The disciples and their frequent blunders are an encouragement to us all – and they went on from their misunderstandings to tell the whole known world about Jesus.

And this eternal sin isn't about swearing, or bad language against the Holy Spirit. That is no better or worse than using Jesus' name as a swear word, a sin that God can and will forgive, as he forgives us when we break the other nine commandments.

The eternal sin is much worse than all of that. It's not an utterance, but a state of mind; it's not a thought, it's a way of thinking, a mind-set, a mind set in concrete.

The scribes, who pronounced that Jesus was possessed by the devil, had seen and heard what he was saying and doing. They saw God's grace and love being poured out on people, through Jesus. They saw the lame walk, the blind set free, sinners forgiven, demons cast out. They were watching the book of Isaiah being

enacted before their very eyes.

But they refused to see it as God's work. Worse than that: they didn't just reject it, they ascribed it to the devil himself. Instead of the *Holy Spirit*, they said he had an *unclean* spirit. They had convinced themselves – or were well on their way to convincing themselves – that Jesus was evil, and must be destroyed. It's only a few verses in Mark since the Pharisees and Herodians began plotting how they might kill Jesus. Instead of the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus, they saw Satan himself, in a twisted conspiracy to undermine their authority and lead people away from God.

And like all conspiracy theorists, no matter what evidence they saw, it all supported their original idea. All they saw confirmed what they already believed. Once people reach this point, there is almost no return. An atheist might look at the world, see examples of evolutionary theory, chemical and biological chain reactions, and deduce that, because of these things, there is no God, that life evolved out of slime. But that conclusion hasn't come from what they see, but from what they thought originally.

And so when the scribes and others looked at Jesus they saw evil, a man possessed, doing serious damage to God's people, despite all the evidence of the good things he was doing, fulfilling the

prophecies they spent their life studying. But he was undermining their authority, and *they* were the religious leaders of God's own people – Jesus could only *be* bad. Stuck in this mind-set, they didn't even think they needed to repent. They didn't choose not to, they just didn't think they needed to.

Stuck like this, they could never receive forgiveness. While they persisted in seeing God's work as the work of the devil, and their own work as God's, they would see no need to repent, no need to ask for the forgiveness that would be theirs if they only asked. The eternal sin is not a thought as such, it's a mind-set, a mind set on its own destruction.

If you're worried you might be guilty of this eternal sin, you aren't. The sheer fact that you're worried about it shows you aren't guilty, that your heart and mind are in the right place. The whole point here is that you commit this sin by blinding yourself to the possibility you might be wrong, and therefore need to repent, which would lead to forgiveness.

## **Conclusion**

I began this talk by quoting CS Lewis. We've come a long way since then. It could have been longer, but I liberally applied the

delete key after I finished writing this talk!

This passage is a stark warning of the hole we humans can dig for ourselves if we try hard enough. I don't think Jesus necessarily is telling the scribes that they are guilty of this eternal sin – it stood as a warning for them also.

So how are we to heed this warning? What are we to do? First off, if anyone here has managed to convince themselves that Jesus was just a man, a 'great moral teacher', I advise you to reconsider your options. Think carefully about what Jesus said and did – you can even ask him, because he is still alive.

Second, it's a warning to those of us in positions of leadership and teaching within the church. God does not fit inside our heads, he is not confined to a book, or a building, or a tradition. We must continually pray for his Spirit to inspire us to see him at work in new and fresh ways, as well as ways more familiar to us.

But lastly, we have a great encouragement from this passage. Jesus bound the devil by resisting his best efforts – and we can do the same; the same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus God has given to us. We won't succeed in defeating the devil every time, not this side of heaven, but in God's strength we can do *his* very best.