

## **SPIRITUAL WARFARE: PART TWO**

### **Mark 3:20-35**

Mark 3:20-35 <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.”

<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. <sup>27</sup> In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house. <sup>28</sup> Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”

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

<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.”

#### **MESSAGE:**

*“I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.” (Mark 3:28-29)* This passage is one of the most challenging—and hotly debated—passages in the New Testament. What is the sin against the holy Spirit? Have we committed it? If Jesus’ death on the cross atoned for all sins—why not this one too? And what does this have to do with Jesus’ family? Does his mother—the virgin Mary—actually doubt the sanity of her Son, the Messiah? And what does it all have to do with us anyway?

Well, let’s look at the situation in which Jesus speaks these words. He has come to the city of Capernaum in Galilee and has gone about teaching the people, healing the sick and casting out demons. He has drawn great crowds, which has not failed to attract the attention of the powerful Sanhedrin—the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem. They have

sent a delegation of legal experts to Capernaum to see if it has become what they called a “seduced city”—a city whose people have been led astray by a rogue preacher. After observing what Jesus has been doing the legal experts level two accusations against him: that he is demon-possessed and that he casts out demons by collusion with the prince of demons, who is called Beelzebul and whom we call Satan. These are serious charges. In effect they are alleging that he is a magician or a sorcerer, either of which was punishable by death under Jewish law.

Jesus first responds to the charge that he casts out demons by the power of Satan. He simply says that Satan would never cast out Satan. For him to do that would divide his kingdom against itself and cause it to self-destruct. That would be stupid, and whatever else Satan is, he is not stupid. Therefore the charge is illogical and false.

Next, he responds to the charge that he is demon-possessed and he does so by means of a parable. He says that Satan is like a powerful ruler who has enslaved his subjects with chains of sin, disease and death and keeps them imprisoned. But He, Jesus, is a more powerful ruler who has come to invade Satan’s realm, bind him and “plunder his possessions.” Far from serving the prince of demons, he has come to overpower him and set his prisoners free.

This is all about spiritual warfare. In is a war in which Satan—a powerful ruler with great armies and resources—has captured mankind and strives to keep them as prisoners of war who are enslaved to sin and death. A war in which Jesus—the stronger man and a more powerful ruler—invades Satan’s evil empire and frees his captive slaves from their bondage to sin and death. A war in which the gates of hell cannot withstand the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is also a story about the nature of power. Satan’s power is the power of ignorance and lies. It’s been said that Satan likes to keep his palace in peace—that is, keep his prisoners oblivious to the fact that they **are** prisoners and that such a thing as “freedom from sin and death” even exists. In other words, he wants to keep his prisoners in the dark.

How successful is he in accomplishing this? Well, how many people do you know who still think that the only two things which are inevitable are death and taxes? That there’s no such thing as a “free lunch”? That we’ve moved beyond antiquated concepts like “sin” and “repentance” and that things that we used to call “sins” can actually be liberating? That the Bible is nothing but fiction anyway and truth lies only in science? Lies—ignorance—death—these are Satan’s stock in trade and they give him great power. But Jesus’ power is the infinite power of the Holy Spirit. A power that created and sustains the universe. A power that convicts the world of sin and then shows sinners how they can be set free from their sins. Jesus is the bearer of the Holy Spirit, the one who sends Him forth to cast out demons, heal the sick, convict people of their sins and show them their Savior.

It is against this background that Jesus condemns those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit by declaring His work to be the work of Satan. The things Jesus had been doing were clear, unmistakable and long-prophesied signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The legal experts sent down from Jerusalem knew this, yet in their zeal to condemn Jesus, they declared these works of God to be the work of Satan. And so, Jesus says, this kind of deliberate rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit is blasphemy which, once committed, cannot be rescinded or forgiven. The author of Hebrews puts it this way: *“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”* (Hebrews 6:4-6) To sin in this way against the Holy Spirit is spiritual treason and for spiritual traitors there is neither repentance nor forgiveness.

But now—rather surprisingly—the text returns to the matter of Jesus’ family—his mother and brothers—who have come looking for him. A few verses before we were told that they had become convinced that he was “out of his mind,” and so they now arrive to take him away. When Jesus is told, *“Your mother and brothers are looking for you,”* he points to his disciples and says, *“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”* What does he mean?

Well, first of all, Jesus is clearly being critical of his biological family. He knew that only unbelief in their hearts could have led them to suspect that he was deranged rather than that he was doing the work of God. Thus, he is suggesting in a dramatic way that their attitude is akin to that of the legal experts from Jerusalem, who disbelieved even though they should have known better. After all, his family was aware of the miracles he had done and his mother, in particular, had heard the prophecies of Simeon, of Anna, of Elizabeth and even of Gabriel—an angel sent by God—concerning her son. Yet she apparently had come to suspect that he was demented rather than the one appointed to redeem Israel, the Messiah of God. And so Jesus is here suggesting in a rather startling way that there are no halfway measures when it comes to believing in him and in the work of the Holy Spirit. His is a radical call into a relationship with him that supersedes all other relationships and which must be honored above them all. *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me....”* (Matt. 10:37) Jesus demands this and he offers no less.

You see, the Church is an army invading an evil empire and its Commander requires absolute loyalty from all who enlist. At Omaha Beach, at Guadalcanal and at Iwo Jima, commanding officers didn’t instruct their troops to give consideration as to whether or not their mission was worthwhile. They pointed them at the beach and told them to destroy the enemy. When we sing, “Lord God of Sabbaoth”—we are singing the song of warriors marching into battle: the word “sabbaoth” means “the armies of God.”

In some quarters of Christendom, military terminology and military analogies are out of favor. Several years ago the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. tried to remove *“Onward Christian Soldiers”* from its hymnals because they didn’t like its militaristic spirit. After a huge outcry from their members, however, they relented and left it in. Of course no one likes war. War is a terrible thing. But whether we like it or not, two thousand years after Jesus launched his invasion of Satan’s evil empire, we are still at war. On June 10, 1994, Billy Graham preached to 39,000 people at Jacobs’ Field. That same evening, Howard Stern, the New York shock jock and self-described prince of pornographic radio, came to Cleveland to celebrate his ascendancy to the number one radio spot in Cleveland. He referred to it as a “Cleveland funeral” wherein he “buried” the rest of the Cleveland radio competition. Many souls were saved through Billy Graham’s preaching, but Stern continued for some time to be the top choice in Cleveland morning radio in a program which targeted “twelve year-olds and up.”

Satan’s ultimate destruction is assured, but he is not dead yet and his kingdom is by no means divided. He still has billions of captives whom he keeps in bondage to sin, ignorance and death. We are the Church Militant: footsoldiers in the Lord’s Sabbath, the armies of the living God, and our captain is still Jesus Christ who leads our invasion of Satan’s evil empire. Whenever and where ever the work of mission, of evangelism is undertaken, Satan is cast out of human hearts through faith in Jesus Christ. And each and every time that occurs, there is rejoicing in heaven and on earth as we sing along with all the saints living and departed:

*“And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear, the distant triumph song; And hearts are brave again and arms are strong: Allelujah! Allelujah!” (“For All The Saints”)*

Amen.