

The Challenge of Belief

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's good to see you all. In our membership class here at Trinity, we make a statement about the Christian life.

We say that believing is belonging. And what we mean in that context is that the Christian life isn't meant to be lived alone in isolation or solo, but that when we claim to believe in Jesus, we become a part of his family, the church.

The question that we're going to explore this morning related to that is a very real question for people, is does it matter what you believe?

There was a survey that came out just recently. The Lifeway Ligonier survey from 2022 discovered a striking reality about the state of belief in America.

So statement seven of this questionnaire read, Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God. 53% of Americans agreed with this statement or strongly agreed with it, and 11% were not sure.

[1 : 0 4] But even more strikingly, inside the church, evangelicals and evangelicals, and we need to define this these days, not people who self-affiliated as evangelicals, nor people who see themselves as a part of a political identity, but people who strongly believed the Bible is the highest authority, believed the importance of encouraging non-Christians to trust Jesus as their Savior, who believed that Jesus' death removed the penalty of sin, and believed that trust in Jesus alone brings salvation.

So people who assented to those four statements, 43 of them strongly agreed or agreed that Jesus was a great teacher but was not God.

That's two-thirds of Americans and over two-fifths of people in Bible-preaching churches who believe something very different than the historic teaching.

Now, some of you may be wondering, okay, but is this really a big deal? You're not alone in that, because this survey also asked the question, what do you think about this statement?

Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion. It's not about objective truth. Sixty percent of Americans agreed with that statement, and 37 percent of those in the church, the evangelical church, also agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

[2 : 3 2] It's a survey. Surveys are imperfect, but it's indicative that the question of whether it matters what you believe is a very real one in our world today.

And as we're continuing in our series in the book of Mark, we're coming to a passage where Jesus has a response to that. And unsurprisingly, maybe, in this church, Jesus does care.

He does care what we think about him. And the stakes are actually pretty high about it. In this passage, he's going to make claims about himself, and he's going to tell us how important it is for us to receive them.

So that's what we're going to look at this morning. We're in Mark chapter 3. If you're visiting, we preach through books of the Bible. We're preaching through the gospel of Mark.

And we're going to be in chapter 3, starting in verse 20. Can we know? Does someone have a page number, Tom? 787. 787. If you're using a pew Bible, 787.

[3 : 32] We're going to be looking at Mark 3, starting in verse 20, and going through verse 35. So with that, let's go ahead and pray together.

Starting in verse 20, I'll explain why we start there in just a minute. But verse 20. Then he, that is Jesus, then he went home, and the crowds gathered again so that they could not even eat.

And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, he's out of his mind. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, he is possessed by Beelzebub.

And by the prince of demons, he cast out the demons. And he called them to him, and he said to them in parables, how can Satan cast out Satan?

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is condemned to, or is coming to an end.

[4 : 38] But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven. The children of men and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

For they had said, he has an unclean spirit. And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside, they sent to him and called to him, and called him.

And the crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, your mother and your brothers are outside seeking you. And he answered them, who are my mother and my brothers?

And looking around at those who sat around him, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.

[5 : 40] Let's pray and ask for God's help to understand his word. Lord, we do pray this morning that by your Spirit, you would open our eyes to see and our minds to understand and our hearts to believe and to treasure, Lord, the truth about you this morning.

Lord, I pray for your help. You would help me to speak as I ought. Lord, and that we together would sit under your word this morning. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So this story is going to come to us in three movements, and the structure of it is kind of like a sandwich. There's a slice of bread, then there's a meat, and then there's another slice of bread. And the bread isn't insignificant, but it shapes it.

And this is why we're actually starting in verse 20, because verse 20 is the beginning of a narrative about the family of Jesus interacting with him. You see it in 20, and then you see it come back to it in 31.

And this is why we started in verse 20 and didn't attach that to the end of the last passage. And the sandwich is, the first one is, what do people around Jesus think of him?

[6 : 50] That's the first slice of bread. And then in the middle, how does Jesus respond to their perspectives? And then finally, what does this mean for belonging to the people of God?

So that's our sandwich that we're going to be looking at this morning. And we're going to look through it in these three sections, the beliefs about Jesus exposed, Jesus' response and clarification of who he is, and then the implications for who can be part of the people of God.

So, this may not be intuitive. This passage doesn't hang together, obviously, as you read it. But I hope that you will see that I think there's a thread that draws it together and that Mark actually created this narrative as a whole for us to see the point that he's making, the points that we're going to see this morning.

So, starting in verse 20, what do the people about Jesus think of him? And remember just where we are in the book of Mark. Before we answer that question, remember where we are. Jesus has come in chapter 1.

He's proclaiming the kingdom of God, and he's living it out by teaching and preaching and healing and casting out demons. So, he's doing things to help people, showing a foretaste of the nature of the kingdom, overcoming the fall and the curse, as he's teaching and proclaiming the truth about God and his kingdom and his salvation that's coming.

[8 : 12] And this is what we've seen throughout the first couple of chapters. And what we just saw, if you were here last week, is that Pastor Nick talked about the calling of the disciples.

That is, Jesus calling a group of men to be representative of the new people of God. And we looked at what that meant. And so, the theme of the question, how do you be a part of the people of God, flows from the passage we've just read.

All right? So, that's context. Now, verses 20 through 22, what do the people around him think? Right? There are two groups that we see in verses 20 through 22.

The first one is his family. Right? And literally, if you look at it, it might be a text note in your, is that it didn't literally use the word family. It said those who were close to him.

This was his inner circle. It certainly would include his family, but it might have also included his close friends, those who knew him, not as a public figure, but someone who had broken bread with him, eaten with him, and knew him more intimately.

[9 : 21] And they're looking at the crowds. They're looking at this thing that's getting, in their minds, out of control, as the crowds are gathering so much that Jesus and his disciples can't even eat.

Right? And so they see this big thing, and they think he is out of his mind. In fact, if you look at verse 20, or verse 21, it says they went out to seize him.

That is, Jesus has jumped the shark. He has lost his way, and we need to go and rescue him from this.

We need to pull him out of this delusion or this mass movement that to them said, this is unreasonable and unhealthy. Jesus perhaps seems to be deluded, and they're going to rescue him from himself.

So that's the first group. And then the second group are the scribes. Remember, these are teachers of the law, those who pronounce both legal and moral judgment for the people of God in the nation of Israel.

[10 : 26] And they had come down from Jerusalem. They had actually gone to the place where Jesus was ministering in the north in order to make a judgment about who Jesus is.

And what they saw was a man who clearly had power, a man who clearly had popularity, but a man who had no regard for their traditions or their current understanding of what it meant to honor God because he was not fasting the way he should have been.

He was breaking the Sabbath, as we've seen in these past couple of weeks. He was doing all the religious stuff wrong as he was embodying the kingdom of God.

And they thought, how do we judge this? There's only one thing. With all the power that he has, it can't be from God because he's clearly disobeying God. So he must be empowered by Satan.

There must be a demonic power in him. He's possessed by a spirit. He is being controlled by the, if you look at verse 22, right?

[11 : 31] The prince of demons is his power. And Baal's a bull, by the way, could be described as someone who is the master of the house.

And this is helpful because Jesus picks up this imagery. They're accusing him of saying, he is, look at verse 22 again. He's possessed by the master of the house, right?

He's possessed by this one who has control over this house. And Jesus is gonna pick up that image later and do something beautiful with it. So what we see is two groups, one coming in from the outside, one who knows Jesus intimately and both of them do not see him rightly.

Now before we move on, let's stop and think for a minute. How much are we like these people? I think regarding his family, for those of us who have grown up in church, for those of us who've grown up in Christendom of various forms, for those of us for whom some knowledge of Jesus has been part of our life the whole time, how easy is it for us to be inoculated against the true Jesus by a shallow understanding of who he is?

Maybe some of you have a view of Jesus that is flannel boards from your childhood growing up. Some of you don't even know what a flannel board is. It's a way of teaching children about Bible stories.

[13 : 06] And when done well, it can be a lovely visual. But in many places, Jesus becomes a two-dimensional felt figure. And it's easy for us to see Jesus in these ways.

And one of the things that we have seen in the last five, ten years within the conservative church movement is that that felt Jesus doesn't match up to the realities of the world.

And when we face racism and social unrest, when we face abuse within the church, when we face great evils and wrongs in the world, that felt Jesus seems like a great disappointment at best and a fraud at worst.

And we see Jesus as insufficient for the world. And we dismiss him. And people say, well, just trust in Jesus.

And look, that can be said flippantly. But people who say that are dismissed. You're out of your mind. That's way too simplistic. We even sometimes feel the need in this moment of disillusionment and disappointment to rescue Jesus, to rescue Jesus from this kind of, from the Bible, because, well, it can't be that, because that thing that I learned was too shallow.

[14 : 33] And so, for those of us who are in the church, who've grown up in the church, there's a danger, isn't there? There's a danger that we might misunderstand Jesus and start saying things like, well, Jesus can't be X, because that doesn't fit.

And we need to recognize how much this pressure is increasing as we live in a world that is increasingly divergent in its social practices from faithful Christianity.

It's going to be a lot easier to say, Jesus can't be X, because the world will say, that's not good. And we have to continue to go back to the Bible to overcome our familiarity with Jesus, to see him as he truly is.

Now, what about the scribes? Well, we could talk for a long time, but in the 20th century, there has been not a new movement, but a strong movement in the last, I don't know, 150 years at least, within the church leadership broadly.

And by church, I'm thinking Protestant church, but I'm thinking broadly. A movement to make Jesus more human and less divine. A desire to diminish his miraculous characteristics.

[15 : 58] A desire to say, Jesus couldn't be supernatural in the ways that the Bible describes him. And so we dismiss his miracles. We deny that he rose from the dead.

Instead, we call him a good teacher, an exemplary man, but no longer is he the Son of God come in power to live and die and to rise again to rescue people.

So it strikes me that these are two of the ways in which our world today is like the first century. We need to be aware of how easily we might be drawn in to these perspectives.

Because Jesus says something very different about himself than these views of him. So let's go on to verse 23 through 30 and see how Jesus responds to their perspectives.

Right? He addresses the scribes' concern first. In verse 23, he says, he calls them together and he speaks to them.

[17:01] Right? And he starts with a logical argument. What you are accusing me of makes no sense. You say, I am empowered by Satan or by demonic powers and I'm casting out demonic powers.

And he just says, that doesn't make any sense. Why would Satan cast out Satan? If demons are fighting against demons, you should be rejoicing, not accusing. Right? This is not a bad thing in the world because a house divided cannot stand.

Right? A kingdom that's fighting against itself will fail. And so Jesus is saying, what you're saying is really nonsensical.

It doesn't... So he just exposes the foolishness and the hard-heartedness of the scribes as he does this. But then he moves on to the parable in verse 27, which I think is where he picks up this idea of Beelzebul being the master of the house.

Right? Look with me in verse 27. No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house. Right?

[18:03] This is a parable. What is he saying? He's saying, look... And let me just expose. Plunder to us has a very negative connotation. But here, Jesus is using it in ultimately a positive sense.

What he's saying is, if you go in to a strong man's house, right? If you go into the mafia boss's house, you've got to get the mafia boss before you can get his goods. Right? If you try to get his goods, the mafia boss is going to come after you.

And if you're not stronger than him, you're going to lose it all. So Jesus is saying, if I'm coming and plundering the house, that is, the people who are under the possession of demons, if I am freeing them from that, then I have already, or I have the power to overcome the strong man who controls the house.

Jesus is saying, I am the stronger man than the one who is controlling these people. And when I bind him, then I have the power to free all of these, to rescue them from darkness, bringing freedom and healing and wholeness to those that, and just like you've seen it.

It's a massive claim. Jesus says, I have greater power than Satan. And he then goes on in verses 28 and 29, and you think, okay, what is the connection here?

[19:34] How did we just get to the unforgivable sin from this? But you see the flow of thought, right? Jesus is saying, look, sins are forgivable, even blasphemy.

And blasphemy is defined as speaking, claiming something, something from God to come from another source, or cursing or reviling God. These would be broad definitions of blasphemy.

And Jesus says, even blasphemy can be forgiven, right? A moment of, a statement of wrongdoing, a statement out of, out of lack of knowledge or ignorance, a statement that is said at one point in life.

All of these things can be forgiven, but, verse 29, right? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is unforgivable.

Now look, in the Gospel of Mark, we need to see what Mark has said about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has shown up primarily in the first chapter. And do you remember what happened in the first chapter?

[20 : 37] Jesus went out to John, as John the Baptist was baptizing in the wilderness. And as Jesus baptized, or as John baptized Jesus, as he came up out of the water, what happened?

He saw the Holy Spirit descending on him, and he heard a voice from heaven saying, this is my son, in whom I'm well pleased. The Holy Spirit, in Mark, right here, in its immediate context, has the role of affirming Jesus' deity, his godness, and God's affirmation that this is the one that God has sent to bring his kingdom.

So when Mark says blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, when Jesus says blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, he is saying, when you deny this thing, the Holy Spirit's affirmation of Jesus, this is the unforgivable sin.

And again, maybe some of you grew up in homes where that was your perspective, but now it's not. Jesus, again, is not saying, if you ever said this once, the unforgivable sin is not, I said the magic words wrong, and now I'm condemned forever.

Nor is it, by the way, I did the one sin that our culture thinks is beyond the pale. I drove a Prius, but I didn't get the hybrid, or whatever, you know.

[21 : 57] I mean, we can laugh and choose whatever, you know, but there are some of you who may be fearing, I've committed the unforgivable sin. I've done something so bad that Jesus can't forgive me of those things.

That is not what this passage is about. This passage is about the verb tense, it's actually, those who blaspheme, those who have a fixed opinion that says, Jesus is not God, and his power comes from somewhere else, not from God.

This is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit that is an unforgivable sin, right? When we don't believe who Jesus is as he's revealed in the scriptures, when we deny his kingdom power, when we say he did not raise from the dead, right?

This is the denial of Christ that is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit's attestation of who Jesus is. And Jesus says that if this is your opinion, if this is your perspective, as he was accusing, he was responding to the scribes and he was revealing to them, said, then you are lost and there is no forgiveness for you and there is an eternal judgment against you that awaits.

Now look, even in this moment, we see in the breadth of scripture, if that scribe had said, oh my gosh, you're right, and had gotten down on his knees and said, forgive me Jesus, I was wrong, Jesus would have responded to that, right?

[23 : 33] Because that would be shown that the fixed opinion wasn't as fixed as it looked. And so, so there is always a turn of repentance, but there is a great warning here. There is a great warning that the consequences of rejecting Christ in these ways are dire and significant.

Again, before we go on, how easily do we deny the power and the person of Christ in our lives? How easily we can deny that he's able to transform the hardened skeptic at our workplace or a family member who seems to hate church and Christ?

How easily do we deny that Jesus can help us to be free from sexual sin or addictions and bring wholeness, can restore broken relationships, can bring justice to a broken world?

How easily do we deny that Jesus has the power to do everything that he claimed to do? How quickly do we abandon him and look to our own devices, our own strategies to bring about the kingdom of God rather than looking to him and trusting him to bring his power and his kingdom in his time to our world?

Jesus says, look at me. Look at who I am, what I've done in my life, in my death, in my resurrection. Look at the cross and the tomb and know that I have overcome sin and death and Satan.

[25 : 23] Look at me and believe. Jesus then goes on and he says, do you see how important this is?

Because the way you respond to this challenge, to this clarification of who I am, this will define whether you're actually truly a part of the people of God or not.

This is what he does in verses 31 through 35. This is why the sandwich is important because this transition from 30 to 31 looks really random, right?

It's like, okay, what happened here? Like, is this a new section? It's not a new section. It's the end of the story. It started with those close to him at the beginning and now it's closing up with them in the end, right?

Jesus has already, and the narrative picks up. Mark sort of picks up the narrative, right? The crowd is mobbing. His family shows up. They can't even get to him, right?

[26 : 23] We've seen this before. The crowds are so big that people can't get to Jesus, right? And Mark is using this also in a beautiful narrative way. He's saying, his family is in the outside, not in the inner circle, but they're on the outside right now looking in.

And they come and they call to him. And again, remember what their intent was. They're going to come and rescue Jesus from his delusion, rescue him from this mob as they see it so that they can seek him to take him away from them.

And the call from his family and particularly his mother would have been a very strong cultural call. I don't know what kind of culture you grew up in, but in first century Jewish culture, if your mom called, you responded, right?

You didn't say, I'll be there sometime or yeah, yeah, next week I'll get back to you. It was an important thing culturally. But Jesus doesn't respond.

Jesus does not respond to the psalms and say, hey, bring my family in or hey, I'm going to go out to my family now because they're here. But what he does is he takes this as an opportunity.

[27 : 37] And in verse 34 and 35, he says, this is my family. These are the people of God, right? Not my biological family with whom I shared, you know, a genetic pool, right?

But who is the real people, right? My family is those who do the will of God. And recognize how much of a challenge this was, not only to his own family, but also to the scribes.

Because the Jewish people identified themselves as God's people as a family. They were the descendants of Abraham, for heaven's sake. They were all a part of one family, one genetic stock, right?

And this was part of their ID badge. I am Jewish because I am descended from Abraham. And Jesus says, the new kingdom comes with a new family.

And the family is defined not by those old identities, but by something even greater. is a question of whether, of how you respond to me.

[28 : 43] Because when Jesus says, it is those who do my will who are my mothers and brothers and sisters. Remember what we've seen. What is, what is the greatest thing that Jesus is saying is God's will?

The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news. And remember what Mark has told us? The good news is about Jesus, the son of God.

So the greatest act of following God, of doing the will of God, is believing in Jesus. Now look, I know it's not just as simple as that.

There's a whole thing, there's a life that flows from that that's really important. But what Jesus is saying here is, these people around here, these people who see me as I really am, coming from God, demonstrating power over the powers of evil and sin and darkness, by my ministry, by my teaching, these people here, these are the people who get what it means to be in God's new family because they understand who I am and they see me.

They have responded to what the call that we'll see later in the book of Acts, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. And friends, this is the good news of the gospel.

[30 : 08] Jesus says it matters. It matters what we believe. It matters that we believe that Jesus really is God, that he really did live and die and rise again, that his death on the cross for our sins made a spiritual difference in the world and that by rising from the dead, he has established and accomplished a redemption, that he's continuing to apply in the world and one day will bring to its fullness and its completion in a way that will be gloriously wonderful.

And we need to believe that these basic truths of the gospel are true and that we see that Jesus is the one who has done these things for us. If we say that Jesus is merely a good teacher but was not God, he has no power to save us.

And the strong man is still ruling in our world and the strong man will still be ruling in your heart if we deny him.

So Jesus comes and he says, look at me, see me for who I am, believe in me for this is how you can be the people of God.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this word.

[31 : 39] Lord, for some of us it is a great comfort to be reminded. But for some of us it is a challenge for we recognize the weakness of our own understanding and the hardness of our hearts.

Lord, we see how there are places where we have denied you. There are places where we have not believed you rightly. Lord, I pray this morning that you by your spirit would help us.

Lord, bring us to a place of humble reception, humble reception of the gospel that you have proclaimed, that you have embodied, that you have accomplished the good news of Jesus.

Lord, I pray for those this morning who may be exploring Jesus that they would hear your call to come and see and believe and to become a part of the people of God. Pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.