

Whoever Does the Will of God

Mark 3:20-35 (ESV)

September 1, 2002

His family thought Jesus was crazy. The religious authorities said he was satanic. His followers believe that he is the Son of God. These three positions are staked out here. Which one is yours?

Jesus “went home, and the crowd 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 is out of his mind.’” His family was ready to lay hands on Jesus, to drag him away, to hide him in the house, to get him out of the public view, because they thought he was crazy. What do you think?

This was near the beginning of his ministry. Jesus had preached the gospel, called his disciples, cast out unclean spirits, taught with authority, healed the sick, forgiven sin, challenged the religious establishment, and gathered a great crowd. His family thought he was crazy. What do you think?

Look at it from their point of view. What good did it do Jesus to alienate the religious authorities? How smart was it to call attention to himself in a militarily occupied country? Even the adoring crowd had threatened to crush him. That must have been what they were thinking.

But why could they not see it from his point of view? The gospel of God was true. The disciples’ lives had been turned around. The powers of evil were being overthrown. The word of God was being taught. The sick were being healed. Sinners were being forgiven. Oppressive interpretations of the law were being challenged. And at least the crowds perceived something in Jesus. What if, instead of being crazy, he really was the Son of God and really is the Son of God? Can we see it from his point of view?

“The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul,’ and ‘by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.’” They said, “He has an unclean spirit.” The best that these urban, highly educated, professional religious authorities could come up with was that Jesus was Satanic. They acknowledged that he was powerful, but they said that he did what he did by the power of the devil. Does that make sense to you?

Jesus had a ready answer for them: “He called them to him and 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 coming to an end. 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." Their accusations of Jesus were nonsensical. The devil would not work against himself. But that did not stop the scribes from accusing Jesus. That did not stop them from speaking poorly of him. That did not stop them from trying to discredit him with the people. What do you say?

We live in a world which is eager to belittle Jesus Christ. He is characterized as a fool or a liar. That is, they say that either he was incredibly naive or he was actively deceiving people. He is dismissed as of no consequence or dreaded as dangerous. The accusations are not new. They go back to his own time on earth. What do you say? Can we believe in him as the Son of God?

Even to the scribes, Jesus did not fail to proclaim the gospel, with both its promise and its warning: "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." It was gracious of him not only to announce forgiveness but also to point out to the scribes that they had crossed a line and entered upon dangerous territory. In general, "all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter." This is wonderful! This is the gospel of God! This is the good news of Jesus Christ! Our sins will be forgiven. The evil we have done, which we cannot undo, will be pardoned, by the blood of Christ. Thanks be to God!

What is the one exception? What is the dreadful, unforgivable sin? "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." What does this mean? The problem was that the scribes had said that Jesus had an unclean spirit. Whereas in fact he was functioning by the Spirit of God, they said he was possessed by the devil. Whereas in fact he was divine, they said he was satanic. The unforgivable sin, then, is precisely the simple refusal to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. This stubborn refusal is serious business. The scribes knew Jesus was powerful. But they refused to give God the glory. Again, what do you say?

"His mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a 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 about 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.'"

Here we have it! At least the crowd was not trying to lay hands on him. At least the crowd was not calling him satanic. The fact that the crowd was sitting around him indicates that they were listening to his teaching, which is what we are

supposed to do. “And looking about 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.’” What does this mean? What is the will of God? What is doing the will of God? It is listening, believing, and obeying. Doing the will of God means listening to the gospel teaching of Jesus Christ, believing that he is the Son of God, and then obeying him. Whoever does this is his brother and sister and mother. Notice that “father” is not even in the list. Why? God alone is his father. That is, this very list of relationships is yet another way of saying that Jesus is the Son of God. And believing that Jesus is the Son of God is doing the will of God. What do you believe?

You see, the burden of the entire Gospel according to Mark is to move us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Chapter one, verse one announces this: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Near the end of the gospel, the centurion responsible for crucifying Jesus watched him die and confessed this faith, saying, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Everything in between is meant to bring us to the same confession of faith: Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The alternatives to this faith are given in today’s reading: his family thought Jesus was crazy; the religious authorities said he was satanic. As we have just seen, the scribes are chastised if not condemned precisely for refusing to acknowledge him as the Son of God. And his biological family is excluded by their own actions from the new family he is gathering around him. The primary meaning, then, of doing the will of God is not the Christian life which flows out of this faith—that comes next, and we will get to that in just a moment—the primary meaning of doing the will of God is believing that Jesus Christ is his Son! That is, doing the will of God is having faith in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. This is primary. This is most important. This is central. Everything else leads up to this or flows out of it. Without this, without belief in Jesus as the Son of God, we have nothing. What do you believe?

“Looking about 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.’” How do we get here? How do we get to this point of doing the will of God, believing in Jesus as the Son of God? We arrive here by listening to the word of God, reading the Bible, and hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus commended the crowd for their listening to him, because it is through the hearing of the gospel that the gift of faith is given. It is through the gospel that we come to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. It is through the gospel that we are brought into the family of Jesus Christ, the people of God. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God. Christ is drawing us into his new, adoptive family, which relativizes and

subordinates all earthly families. After all, look who is still standing outside the door at the end of today's reading.

This hearing and listening to the gospel is not a once in a lifetime event. This is not something we do once and never have to repeat. Instead, we draw our very life from it every day. We need to hear the word of God over and over again. We are nourished by the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout our lives. Yes, there is a time of initially coming to faith. And yet, our faith always needs strengthening. We continue to grow through the same means by which we first came to faith, the preaching of the gospel. We who are brothers and sisters to Jesus are a people of the word, his word, and we always will be.

This reality has tremendous significance for our ongoing lives together. Part of what it means for us to be the church, to be doing the will of God, is for us to provide for the preaching of the gospel. Building and maintaining this sanctuary is a visible part of that. Calling and paying a minister is part of that. Providing for the radio broadcast of this service is part of that. All of these are well known and easily visible parts of providing for the preaching of the word. But there is much more. As a congregation, we need to value the hearing of the word and to cultivate cherishing the hearing of the word. We need to exist as a listening community which encourages all of its members to hear and which also calls some of its members to become preachers for the next generation. This level of response may not be immediately visible, but it is extraordinarily important as part of our doing the will of God and humanly providing for the long term well being of the church.

Along with building congregations that cultivate hearing and encourage ministry, we also need to build schools that not only teach reading but also teach the Christian faith. We need to build colleges that can apply a Christian world view to broad areas of human learning. And we need to build seminaries that can train pastors in studying the Bible, proclaiming the gospel, and spreading the Christian faith. Sanctuaries, ministers, media, candidates, schools, colleges, and seminaries—all of these are part of our doing the will of God, providing for the hearing of the word now and in the future, and all of these cost a great deal of money. A big part of our obedience to God has to do with our making substantial and sacrificial gifts to the church of Jesus Christ, to support its ministry and mission. Brothers and sisters of Christ, I invite us all to share in this as we make our gifts for this year and when we make our pledges for next year.

In addition to this providing for the preaching of the gospel, another part of our doing the will of God is our believing in Jesus Christ and our continual growing in the faith. The single most important piece of this is our faithful participation in the Sunday worship services of the church. We have nearly five-hundred members. Our worship attendance averages about two-hundred, and that includes a lot of visitors

and a lot of children. So on any given Sunday, more of our members think that they do not need to be here than think that they do need to be here. I do not care how that compares with other congregations. It is simply not good. We need a lot more of our members here. Perhaps you who are here can help me get the word out. Another piece of this learning and growing has to do with our whole Christian education program in general and with our Sunday School program in particular. We operate this Sunday School twelve months of the year, all fifty-two Sundays, and we have classes for children, youth, and adults. Not only is everyone welcome, but also everyone needs to be here. This is part of our doing the will of God. And again, giving to support this program is part of our doing the will of God.

In addition to listening to the word of God, providing for the hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ, believing that Jesus is the Son of God, and growing in the faith, it is also the case that part of our doing the will of God has to do with our loving God and loving neighbor. This is what we are told in the Ten Commandments. This is what we are told in the Great Commandment. We are to love God and love neighbor. This is part of doing the will of God. Of course, this means feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, and visiting the sick and those in prison. But what greater love of God and neighbor can we have than to bring people here to church to hear the word of God, to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and so to become brothers and sisters of Christ themselves by doing the will of God?

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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