

The Gospel of Mark, Teacher's Guide

Week 4: Following Jesus in a Divided World

Mark 3:1–35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Mark 3:1–35 brings the early Galilean ministry of Jesus to a sharp turning point. In a single chapter Mark gathers a cluster of confrontations and choices that will shape the rest of the Gospel. The Sabbath healing hardens the Pharisees into murderous opposition (vv. 1–6). The pressing crowds and shouting demons swarm the seashore (vv. 7–12). Jesus deliberately appoints the Twelve on the mountain (vv. 13–19). His own relatives say He has lost His mind and try to take Him home (vv. 20–21, 31–35). And in the deeply important Beelzebul controversy He speaks some of the most sobering words in the Gospel about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (vv. 22–30). Doctrinally this lesson will need to address the proper interpretation of God's law, the identity and authority of Christ, the founding of the apostolic community, the reality of Satan and his defeat, the present inauguration of the kingdom of God, and the much-debated question of the unpardonable sin. None of these are small topics, and the teacher should expect questions on each one.

But this lesson is not only doctrinal. Mark 3 is also one of the most formationally pointed chapters in the Gospel. The man with the withered hand has to make a public, costly choice to stand up and stretch out his hand. The Twelve are called first to "be with" Jesus before they are sent out to preach. The crowds press in for healing, but it is unclear who among them will follow Him after their need has been met. The scribes harden. The family doubts. Jesus quietly redefines what family even means. The student sitting in front of you will recognize themselves somewhere on that map. Aim for this lesson to help them see the divided world they actually live in, identify where they have been quietly hiding their own withered hand, and decide afresh whose side they intend to be on when the lines are drawn around Jesus.

For the teacher's heart, the heaviest moment in this lesson will be Question 9 on the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Some Christians have spent years afraid that they have committed this sin. Others have used the warning carelessly. Teach this question with both biblical clarity and tender warmth. Make clear what Jesus is condemning in the scribes (a persistent, knowing, hardened attribution of the Spirit's work to Satan, a settled choice against the only voice that calls them to repent), and what He is not condemning (a moment of doubt, a season of struggle, a fearful question shouted in grief). Tie the answer back to the New Testament pattern of salvation. Those who have heard the gospel, believed in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repented of sin, confessed Him before others, and been baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27), and who continue to walk with Him in faith and obedience, have not committed this sin and they need to hear that clearly while still being called to ongoing faithfulness.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus enters the synagogue, sees the man with the withered hand, and asks the watchful religious leaders, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (v. 4). What is Jesus teaching about the true purpose of God's law, and how does His question expose the hardness of heart that can grow inside religious people who know the rules well?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark sets the scene with surgical precision. Jesus enters the synagogue. A man with a withered hand is present. The watchers are already in position. "And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him" (v. 2). They are not searching the man's face or wondering about his pain. They are searching Jesus' face for grounds of accusation. Mark has shown us this kind of religious posture before, but here it is unmistakable. Rules without mercy. Knowledge of the law without love for the people the law was given to bless.

Jesus does not wait for them to lay their trap. He calls the man forward into the open and asks one of the most searching questions in the Gospel: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" The question dismantles the false categories the Pharisees have built around the Sabbath. They have made it their business to define what is and is not allowed on the day, but they have lost the meaning of the day itself. The Sabbath, like all of God's law, was always meant to bless human beings and to glorify God. Refusing to do good when good is in your power is not neutral. It is itself a violation of the spirit of God's law (James 4:17).

His question also exposes a deeper truth about religious people. Knowledge of the rules can grow right alongside a hardened heart. The Pharisees in this room can quote the Law. They cannot rejoice when a man is healed. They can defend Sabbath observance. They cannot defend a wounded image-bearer of God in their own synagogue. The hardness Mark names in verse 5 is not anti-religious. It is religious. It is what happens when love of being right replaces love of God and love of neighbor.

The result of this Sabbath confrontation is staggering. "The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (v. 6). The Pharisees were a strict religious party. The Herodians were a secular political faction loyal to Herod. These two groups normally despised each other. But shared hatred of Jesus is a powerful unifier. From this point on in Mark, opposition to Jesus will only escalate. The lesson is sobering. Religion that has not been formed by love is not safer than no religion at all. It can become the most dangerous opposition of all.

Help students see how easily this same posture can grow inside a long-tenured Christian. The longer we have been in church, the more we know, and the easier it is to forget that knowing

was supposed to make us more like Jesus, not more like the Pharisees in this room. The corrective is not to know less but to let what we know land deeper, until our knowledge of God's word actually produces love for the people in front of us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The purpose of God's law as life-giving and love-producing, not life-stifling (Matthew 22:37–40)
- Hardness of heart as a real and growing spiritual danger, even among religious people (Hebrews 3:12–13)
- The Old Law fulfilled in Christ, who properly interprets and embodies it (Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14–17)
- The unity of love for God and love for neighbor as the proper summary of God's commands
- The danger of religious knowledge without ongoing repentance and love (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)
- The opposition Jesus provoked grew from religious people whose loyalty was to their tradition rather than to God

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you see “is it lawful?” questions still being asked today in ways that protect us from actually loving people?
- How can you tell when love of being right has begun to crowd out love of God or neighbor in your own heart?
- What is one small step a long-tenured Christian can take so that knowledge of Scripture keeps softening, not hardening, their heart?

Question 2

Student Question:

Mark says Jesus looked around at them “with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (v. 5). Where in your own walk are you most prone to a hardness of heart, a place where the right answer matters more to you than the actual person in front of you, and how would you recognize it in yourself if it began to grow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark gives us a window into the inner life of Jesus that is rare in the Gospels. “And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (v. 5). Jesus is angry and grieved at the same time. He is not detached. The hardness of heart in the room is not just a doctrinal failure. It is a tragedy. Real people are walking away from God while standing inside the synagogue.

Hardness of heart is a slow thing. No one wakes up in the morning and decides to be hardened. It happens by small refusals over time. A small refusal to be moved by someone else's suffering. A small refusal to admit a wrong. A small refusal to listen when Scripture disturbs us. A small refusal to repent of a sin that has become familiar company. Hebrews warns the church that hearts harden "by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13), and the deceit is precisely that each small refusal feels manageable until the cumulative weight of them produces a heart that can no longer respond.

Help students see that the diagnostic question is not, "Am I hardened?" but, "Where am I most prone to harden?" The Pharisees in this room were probably blind to their own condition. Their hardness was wrapped in religious language. They could not see it because they were standing inside it. The honest answer for most Christians is that we have a particular area, a particular relationship, or a particular topic where our hearts have grown quietly resistant. Naming that area is the first step toward letting Jesus soften it.

The good news is that hardness is not the final word. The same Jesus who looks at hardened hearts with anger is the One who tenderly restores withered hands. Hardness of heart is dangerous, but it is not invincible. Repentance is still possible. The Spirit still moves. The Word still calls. The community of faith still pulls a hardening Christian back toward life. Elders, teachers, and faithful brothers and sisters serve as those who refuse to let one another drift into hardness unnoticed (Hebrews 3:12–13).

Press students gently toward honest self-examination. Ask them to name (silently, in their journal, or to one trusted person) one specific area where they sense their heart growing harder, not softer, over time. Then invite them to bring that area to Jesus this week. The cure for hardness is not effort. It is renewed exposure to the love of Christ in His Word, His table, and His people.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality and progressive nature of hardness of heart, even among believers (Hebrews 3:12–13)
- The connection between unchecked sin and a conscience that grows dull (1 Timothy 4:2)
- The role of Christian community in keeping one another tender (Hebrews 3:13, "exhort one another every day")
- Repentance as the gracious means by which God softens what has grown hard
- The compassion of Christ toward hardened sinners, expressed in both grief and continued ministry

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your life do you sense yourself growing more rigid rather than more tender as you mature in faith?

- What “small refusals” might quietly be hardening a heart that genuinely wants to follow Jesus?
- Who in your church family could you ask to speak honestly to you if they sensed hardness beginning to grow?

Question 3

Student Question:

When Jesus moves toward the sea, the crowds press in so heavily that He has to teach from a small boat, and the unclean spirits cry out, “You are the Son of God” (vv. 7–11). What does it mean that the demons recognize Jesus’ identity with perfect accuracy and yet remain His enemies, and what does this tell us about the difference between knowing the truth about Jesus and submitting to Him as Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

As Jesus moves from the synagogue toward the sea, the crowds explode. People come from every direction (vv. 7–8), pressing in so hard that He must have a small boat ready so that they will not crush Him. In the middle of this swirl of need, Mark gives us a striking detail. “And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’ And he strictly ordered them not to make him known” (vv. 11–12). Two strange things are happening at once. The demons confess Jesus’ identity with perfect accuracy. And Jesus refuses to receive their testimony.

The demons’ confession is doctrinally precise. They do not say, “You are a teacher,” or “You are a prophet.” They say, “You are the Son of God.” This is exactly what Mark declared at the opening of his Gospel (1:1) and what the Father proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism (1:11). The demons cannot help confessing the truth they see. James says it bluntly: “Even the demons believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). Spiritual beings often see what religious people miss. The Pharisees who can quote Scripture cannot recognize the Son of God standing in their synagogue. Unclean spirits identify Him on sight.

This is one of the most important warnings in the New Testament. Right doctrine about Jesus is not the same as right relationship with Jesus. A person can give the correct answer about the deity of Christ, His resurrection, His authority, and His return, and still stand in the camp of His enemies. The demons are not deceived about who Jesus is. They are simply opposed to Him. Their accurate theology produces no obedience, no submission, no faithful walking after Him.

Why does Jesus silence them? He does not need their advertising. The kingdom is not going to be heralded by unclean spirits. The way Jesus will be made known is through the slow, faithful ministry of His Word, the obedience of His chosen apostles, His miracles done in love, and ultimately His cross and resurrection. He will not take publicity from any source. Notice how this

contrasts with the next paragraph. He silences the demons but appoints the Twelve precisely so that they might preach (v. 14).

For students the takeaway is sobering. It is possible to have impressively correct doctrine and still be in the wrong camp. The decisive question is not, “What do I know about Jesus?” but, “Am I bowing to Him as Lord, walking in repentance, doing what He says, and living in His family?” Doctrinal accuracy without obedient discipleship is the religion of demons, not of disciples.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The deity of Christ confessed even by unwilling spiritual beings (James 2:19)
- The reality of the spiritual realm and the personal, organized nature of demonic forces
- The difference between intellectual assent and saving submission to Christ
- Christ’s authority over the demonic realm displayed without struggle
- The unfitness of unclean lips to herald the gospel; Christ chooses His own messengers
- The proper response to Jesus as hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Romans 10:9–10)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it dangerous to assume that knowing the right answers about Jesus is the same as following Him?
- What does the difference between the demons’ “confession” and a Christian’s confession actually look like in daily life?
- How can we test whether our knowledge of Christ has actually become surrender to Him?

Question 4

Student Question:

In verses 13–14, Jesus calls the Twelve up to the mountain, “and he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.” Notice the order. Be with Him first; then go out. Where in your life are you tempted to skip the “with Him” part and rush ahead to the “sent out” part, and what does that imbalance produce in your soul over time?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark’s wording in verse 14 deserves careful attention. Jesus appointed the Twelve “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.” Two purposes, in a deliberate order. Be with Him first. Then be sent. The two are bound together, but the priority is clear. Apostles are first companions of Jesus. Then they are ambassadors of Jesus. The order matters.

This is one of the most countercultural sentences in the Gospel for activist Christians. We tend to think of discipleship as primarily what we do for Jesus. Mark roots it first in what we are with

Jesus. Before any preaching, before any mission, before any program, before any class taught or door knocked, Jesus calls the Twelve up the mountain to be with Him. They will eat with Him, walk with Him, pray with Him, sit silently with Him in tired moments, watch how He treats children and lepers, and absorb who He is simply by living next to Him.

When we reverse this order, the soul suffers. A Christian who is always sent and never with begins to dry out. The ministry begins to feel like a performance. Prayer thins out. Joy, that great mark of life in the Spirit, becomes harder to find. Many burnouts in church work are not really about being too busy. They are about being too far from Jesus while being too busy for Him.

Help students think practically. What does “being with Jesus” look like for a believer today? It includes unhurried time in His Word, not just to prepare lessons but to know Him. It includes honest, conversational prayer that does not always have an agenda. It includes the Lord’s Supper as a real meeting with Christ each first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). It includes faithful gathering with the saints to hear Him in the preached word and respond in song, prayer, and worship (Hebrews 10:24–25). It includes quiet moments throughout the day when we deliberately turn the attention of our heart back to Him.

The deepest formation in this lesson is not technique. It is restoration of the order. Be with Him first. Be sent from that with-Him-ness. The Twelve’s ministry will eventually shake the Roman Empire, but it begins on a mountain simply being with their Lord. Ours must begin the same way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The priority of communion with Christ over service for Christ
- The Christian life as both relationship and mission, in that order
- The danger of activism untethered from the inner life with God
- The Lord’s Supper as a weekly meeting with the risen Christ (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26)
- The role of corporate worship and assembly in sustaining inner communion (Hebrews 10:24–25)

Discussion Prompts

- What signs would tell you that your service for Christ has gotten ahead of your time with Christ?
- What practical rhythm helps you actually be with Jesus on a normal week, not just talk about Him?
- How does worship on the Lord’s Day strengthen your sense of being with Christ in the rest of life?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus deliberately chooses and names twelve specific men in verses 13–19. Looking at the strange variety of the group (fishermen, a tax collector, a former Zealot, even Judas who would betray Him) and at the number twelve itself, what is Jesus signaling about the kind of community He is forming, and how does this scene anticipate the foundation of His church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is one of the most important pivot points in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus deliberately goes up on a mountain (a place loaded with biblical echoes of revelation, covenant, and calling) and “called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve” (vv. 13–14). The verb Mark uses for “appointed” is the same word the Greek Old Testament uses for God’s creative acts. Jesus is establishing something new on that mountain.

The number twelve is not accidental. Israel was a nation of twelve tribes. By appointing twelve apostles, Jesus is signaling that He is reconstituting the people of God around Himself. The promises made to Israel are not being abandoned. They are being brought to fulfillment in a new community whose Lord is Jesus and whose foundation will be these twelve men (Ephesians 2:19–22). The church that will come to public birth on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 is being quietly assembled here on a Galilean mountain.

The variety of the Twelve is striking. Mark names them in verses 16–19. Simon, the impulsive fisherman renamed Peter (rock). James and John, brothers, given the bold nickname Sons of Thunder. Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus. Simon the Cananaean, almost certainly a former Zealot, a member of a revolutionary movement that hated Roman occupation. And Judas Iscariot, “who betrayed him.” A tax collector who collaborated with Rome (Matthew) and a Zealot who would have wanted to kill Romans (Simon) are now called to walk together for years on the same dusty road, both transformed by being with Jesus. The kingdom of God in miniature.

Notice also Judas. Jesus chooses a man He knows will betray Him. Some students may wonder if this contradicts the idea of a genuine human response to God’s call. It does not. Judas was not compelled to betray. He was given every opportunity to repent. He chose otherwise. Mark records his inclusion to remind us that even in the closest circle to Jesus, the possibility of falling away is real. Salvation that begins in fellowship with Christ must be preserved through ongoing faithful response.

The choosing of the Twelve foreshadows the founding of Christ’s church. After His resurrection and ascension, these same men (with Matthias replacing Judas) will receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and proclaim the gospel for the first time in its fullness (Acts 2). The kingdom Jesus announced (Mark 1:14–15) will be established through their preaching. The church is not a denomination tacked on later. It is the one body Christ Himself began to form on this mountain (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:47).

For students two practical lessons follow. First, Jesus still builds His church through ordinary, varied people whom He calls. The diversity of personality, background, and history in your own congregation is a feature, not a flaw. Second, Jesus's choice to walk for years with men He knew would fail in different ways is an encouragement. He calls real people, not idealized images.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The appointment of the Twelve as the foundation of Christ's church (Ephesians 2:19–22; Matthew 16:18)
- The number twelve as deliberate, signaling the reconstitution of God's people around Christ
- The diversity of the apostolic band as a model for the church Jesus builds
- The unique authority and role of the apostles in founding the church and giving the New Testament Scriptures (John 16:13; 2 Peter 1:20–21)
- The possibility of falling away even from a position of closeness to Christ (Judas; Hebrews 6:4–6)
- Christ as the builder of His one church, into which the saved are added by the Lord (Acts 2:47)

Discussion Prompts

- How does the variety of the Twelve shape your expectations of who Jesus calls today?
- What does the appointment of the Twelve on the mountain teach us about how Christ has built and continues to build His church?
- In what ways does the example of Judas warn us, and in what ways does it encourage us?

Question 6

Student Question:

The text says Jesus' family came out to seize Him because people were saying, "He is out of his mind" (v. 21). Even those closest to Him by blood did not at first understand Him. Where in your own life have you felt the cost of following Jesus inside your own family or your closest relationships, and how do you keep walking with Him faithfully when the people you love most do not yet see what you see?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Mark 3:21 is one of the most painful verses in the Gospel. "And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" Jesus' own relatives, those who had grown up around Him in Nazareth, are not yet on His side. They have heard the reports of His ministry, the crowds, the conflicts, and they conclude that He has lost His mind. They mean it as kindness. They mean to bring Him home. But it lands as one of the hardest forms of misunderstanding a person can know, the misunderstanding of family.

Tradition tells us that several of Jesus' brothers (including James and Jude) eventually came to faith and became leaders in the early church. James became a pillar of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9) and wrote the New Testament letter that bears his name. Jude wrote the brief letter named for him. But that came later. At this point in the story, the family is on the outside, urging Jesus to come back to ordinary life. Following God's call has put Jesus on a different road from the people who loved Him first.

Many disciples carry this same wound. A parent who does not understand why you take church so seriously. A sibling who treats your faith as a phase. A spouse who has not yet come to Christ. A grown child who has walked away from what you tried to teach them. Mark wants us to know that Jesus felt this kind of pain. He knew what it was to be misunderstood by His own household.

This is also where the chapter is going to make its great pivot. By the time we reach verses 31–35, Jesus will be redefining family. Blood is not the deepest tie. Doing the will of God is. That redefinition does not erase the family we were born into. Jesus continues to honor His mother, even from the cross (John 19:26–27). But it does mean that the family of faith is given to us in part to walk with us through the painful seasons when our blood family does not understand.

Help students name this honestly. Sometimes the cost of discipleship lands hardest at home. Encourage them to keep loving their unbelieving family with patience and prayer, holding out hope as Jesus did with His own brothers. And encourage them to lean into the family of God for support during the seasons of pain. The local congregation is supposed to be exactly the place where misunderstood disciples are reminded that they are not alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The genuine cost of discipleship in family relationships (Matthew 10:34–39; Luke 14:25–27)
- The pattern of conversion happening over time, sometimes well after initial unbelief (Jesus' brothers)
- The role of the local church as a true family for believers (1 Timothy 5:1–2; Hebrews 13:1)
- Continuing love and honor of family even when they do not yet share the faith (Ephesians 6:1–3; 1 Timothy 5:8)
- Honest acknowledgment of grief in mixed-faith families, met with patient hope

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your own family has following Jesus been most costly so far?
- What does it look like to honor unbelieving family while remaining faithful to Christ?
- How could our church family more deliberately surround believers whose blood family does not yet share their faith?

Question 7

Student Question:

The scribes from Jerusalem accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (v. 22). Jesus responds with the saying of a kingdom and a house divided against itself, and then He pictures a “strong man” being bound and his house plundered (vv. 23–27). What is Jesus claiming about the kingdom of God, the defeat of Satan, and His own authority in this confrontation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When the scribes from Jerusalem accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (v. 22), they are making a desperate move. They cannot deny that He is doing extraordinary things, so they attempt to reassign the source of His power. If they can convince the crowds that Jesus is operating by demonic power, they can keep Him at arm’s length and protect their own authority. Jesus will not let the accusation stand.

His response begins with logic. “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” (vv. 23–25). Satan’s kingdom is real, organized, and opposed to God. He is not casting out his own forces. The reality is something far more disturbing to the scribes. Jesus is operating by a power greater than Satan, a power Satan cannot resist.

Then Jesus draws a vivid picture. “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” (v. 27). The strong man is Satan. His house is the dominion of darkness, including the lives of the people he has held captive. Jesus is announcing that He has come precisely to bind the strong man. The exorcisms, the healings, the forgiveness of sins, are all the plundering of Satan’s house by One who is stronger than he is.

This is one of the clearest announcements in Mark that the kingdom of God is breaking in. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan are at war, and Jesus has come not to negotiate a truce but to win. The cross will be the decisive battle, where Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Colossians 2:15). The empty tomb will be the public proof that the strong man has been bound and his house is being plundered.

Be careful here to keep the kingdom in its biblical timeline. Daniel prophesied that “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44). Jesus announced that the kingdom was at hand (Mark 1:14–15). On the day of Pentecost the kingdom came in power with the establishment of the church (Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). The strong man is already bound. Christ is already reigning at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20–23). The church is the present, visible expression of His kingdom on earth. We are not waiting for the kingdom to arrive at some future earthly date. We are living, by faith, inside the kingdom that has come.

For students this means real hope. The opposition is real, but the outcome is not in doubt. Christ has overcome (John 16:33). When we feel the weight of evil, both around us and inside our own struggles, we are not facing an undefeated enemy. We are walking in the wake of a King who has already plundered Satan's house and continues to call captives out of it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The reality of Satan as a personal, organized, and opposed enemy of God's purposes
- Christ's authority over Satan, demonstrated in His ministry and decisively secured at the cross (Colossians 2:13–15)
- The kingdom of God as already established through Christ's ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and the founding of the church (Daniel 2:44; Mark 1:15; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13)
- The church as the present manifestation of Christ's reign on earth (Ephesians 1:20–23)
- Hope for believers in spiritual struggle: the strong man is already bound
- The error of expecting Christ's kingdom to begin at some future earthly date rather than recognizing His present reign

Discussion Prompts

- What does the picture of Jesus "binding the strong man" tell us about His authority over the forces opposed to us?
- How does knowing the kingdom of God has already come, not merely is yet to come, change the way you live each day?
- Where in your life right now do you most need to live in the confidence that Christ has already won?

Question 8

Student Question:

It is easier than we think to call good evil and to assign the work of God's Spirit to some other source. Where in your own life are you tempted to dismiss, mock, or quietly rename something the Lord is clearly doing because it is uncomfortable or because it threatens your control, and what does that pattern reveal about your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Beelzebul accusation is not a quaint, ancient mistake. It is a permanent temptation of the human heart. When God begins to do something that disrupts our comfort or threatens our position, it is easier to question the source than to surrender to the work. The scribes did not say, "We do not understand this; let us seek God's mind." They said, "He has Beelzebul" (v. 22). They reclassified what God was doing rather than reclassifying their own posture toward God.

We do this in subtler ways. A spouse begins to walk with the Lord more deeply, and the other quietly labels it "going overboard." A child becomes convicted about generosity, and a parent

labels it “naive.” A congregation moves toward greater obedience in some area, and longtime members find a way to brand it “too far.” A young Christian is on fire for evangelism, and we explain it away as a passing phase. We do not call it Beelzebul. We have politer vocabulary. But the move is the same. We assign a wrong source to what God is doing so that we do not have to respond to Him.

Help students see how their own self-talk often does this internally. The Spirit prompts a hard conversation; we tell ourselves it is “anxiety.” He moves us toward a sacrificial gift; we tell ourselves it is “guilt-tripping.” He convicts us of a habit; we tell ourselves it is “scrupulosity.” The pattern is to assign the prompt to anything other than God, because God’s prompts are costly and the alternatives are easier to ignore.

The corrective is humility before God’s word and openness to His Spirit working through it. We learn to ask, instead of “What is wrong with that prompt?” the more honest question, “What if this is really God?” That question reopens the door to repentance and obedience. Christians who consistently ask that question are slowly transformed. Those who refuse to ask it slowly harden, in exactly the way the scribes did.

Spend time in the discussion drawing out concrete examples from the students’ own lives. Avoid making this abstract. The point is to expose the specific places where we have learned to dismiss God’s work to protect our preferences.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to misname God’s work in order to avoid responding to it
- The Holy Spirit’s ongoing role in convicting and prompting believers (John 16:8; Romans 8:14)
- The connection between honest self-examination and ongoing repentance
- The seriousness of resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51) without falling into despair
- Discernment as the disciplined practice of testing prompts against Scripture, not dismissing them by reflex (1 John 4:1)

Discussion Prompts

- What “polite” labels do we use to dismiss something that may actually be the Spirit at work?
- Where in your life are you most prone to question the source of a conviction rather than respond to it?
- What practice helps you ask, “What if this is really God?” instead of explaining a prompt away?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus says, “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” (vv. 28–29). What is the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” what is it not, and how should this passage shape both our reverence for the Spirit’s work and our assurance as believers who have responded to the gospel in faith, repentance, confession, and baptism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the most sobering question in the lesson, and it must be handled with both biblical clarity and tender warmth. Jesus says, “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” (vv. 28–29). Mark immediately gives the context: “for they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (v. 30). The “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” in this passage is specifically the persistent, knowing, hardened attribution of the Holy Spirit’s work in Christ to Satan.

Notice carefully what Mark records about the scribes. They had seen Jesus’s miracles. They had heard His teaching. They had every reason to recognize the Spirit of God at work. Yet they chose to attribute that work to the devil. This was not a moment of confusion. It was a settled position taken against the very evidence God had given them. It was the act of a heart so hardened that the Spirit who calls sinners to repentance had become the very thing they were calling demonic. To call good evil at that level, in the face of that much light, is to cut oneself off from the only voice that calls one to repent.

It is just as important to say what this sin is not. It is not a single rash word spoken in a moment of unbelief. Peter denied Christ three times and was restored (John 21:15–19). Paul was a blasphemer and a persecutor and yet received mercy (1 Timothy 1:13–16). It is not a passing doubt, a season of depression, an angry prayer, or a fearful question shouted at God in grief. Many sincere believers have spent years tormented by the fear that they have committed the unpardonable sin. The very fact that they fear it is strong evidence that they have not. A person committing this sin no longer feels grieved about it. Their conscience has gone silent toward God.

Here is the heart of teaching this question. The promise of the gospel is that “all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter” (v. 28). The path of forgiveness is the one the New Testament repeatedly lays out: hearing the gospel, believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing Him before others, and being baptized into Him for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27; Romans 10:9–10). Anyone who is responding to that call, who feels grief over sin, who is willing to repent, who is hungry for Christ, is not committing the unpardonable sin. The Spirit who calls them is still being heard.

At the same time, the passage stands as a real warning. Hardness of heart is dangerous. A person can resist the Spirit until the Spirit no longer presses (Acts 7:51). The New Testament repeatedly warns Christians not to drift into apostasy (Hebrews 3:12–13; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22). Salvation is not guaranteed in advance regardless of how a person lives or believes. It is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience (Galatians 5:4; Revelation 2:10). The right response to Mark 3:28–30 is not anxious self-examination about whether one may have accidentally committed an unpardonable sin, but renewed faithfulness, renewed dependence on the Spirit’s work, and renewed responsiveness to His call.

Many teachers will have at least one student in the room who has carried this fear privately. Speak directly to that fear. Anyone who hungers for Christ has not blasphemed the Spirit. Anyone who wants to repent is being given the gift of repentance. Anyone who has heard the gospel, believed, repented, confessed Christ, and been baptized into Him, and who is still seeking to walk with Him in faithfulness, stands in His mercy. Use this question to comfort the troubled and to warn the casual, in that order.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of persistent, settled rejection of the Holy Spirit’s call (the “unpardonable sin”)
- The breadth of forgiveness offered in Christ for “all sins” and “whatever blasphemies” when met with repentance and faith
- The plan of salvation as hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)
- The reality of falling away as a continuing biblical warning to believers (Hebrews 3:12–13; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22)
- The error of “once saved, always saved” as a guarantee apart from continuing faith and obedience (Galatians 5:4)
- The assurance that anxious concern over this sin is itself evidence that one has not committed it
- The Spirit’s continuing work of conviction and call as the great gift to be received, not resisted

Discussion Prompts

- How would you explain the “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” to a friend who is afraid they have committed it?
- What comfort does this passage offer to a believer who is repenting and walking in faith?
- How does this passage warn believers against drifting into hardness and call us to renewed faithfulness?

Question 10

Student Question:

The chapter ends with Jesus' true family being defined not by blood but by obedience. "Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 35). As you close this divided chapter, where is Jesus calling you to stand more openly with His family by actually doing the will of God in some concrete area He has been pressing on your heart, even when it costs you the approval of others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter that began in a synagogue full of hostile religious leaders ends with Jesus quietly redefining family. His mother and brothers stand outside, asking for Him (v. 31). The crowd around Him passes the message. He looks around at those who are sitting at His feet and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (vv. 34–35). In a single sentence He has rearranged the deepest categories of human identity.

Jesus is not despising His blood family. He continues to honor His mother throughout His ministry and entrusts her care to John from the cross (John 19:26–27). But He is making clear that the deepest ties in His kingdom are not biological. They are formed by a shared response to the will of God. The brother sitting next to you in worship on the Lord's Day is more truly your kin in eternity than the unbelieving relative who shares your last name.

This is the climactic question of the chapter. In a divided world, where do we belong? Jesus's answer is concrete. We belong with those who hear God and do what God says. Family in His kingdom is defined by obedience to the will of the Father, not by sentiment, heritage, ethnicity, denomination, or any other category. Either we are doing the will of God or we are outside the family. There is no third option.

For most students the will of God will be focused this week on something quite small and quite specific. A conversation that needs to happen. A sin to confess. A habit to break. A neighbor to bless. A relationship to mend. A step of obedience that has been delayed. The will of God almost always shows up in concrete invitations, not in vague generalities. The question is whether we will obey.

Tie the lesson together. The chapter began with a man asked to stand up and stretch out his hand in front of people who did not want Jesus there. It ends with Jesus calling everyone in earshot to step into His family by doing the Father's will. Both moments require us to come out of hiding. Both involve some kind of cost. Both also offer something far better than what we are leaving behind.

Close the lesson by inviting each student to name (silently or to one trusted person) one specific area where the Father's will has been clear and they have been delaying. Then ask them to take one step this week. The chapter is not finished until obedience begins.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The family of God redefined around faith, obedience, and the will of the Father (John 1:12–13; Romans 8:14–17)
- The local church as the practical, present expression of that family
- The honor still owed to natural family within the priorities of the kingdom (Ephesians 6:1–3; 1 Timothy 5:8)
- The will of God as concrete and obedient, not merely vague or sentimental (James 1:22–25)
- Obedience as the evidence of belonging to Christ’s family (Matthew 7:21; John 14:15)
- The ongoing call to faithful Christian living after the initial response to the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your life does the family of God most clearly carry you, and where do you most need to lean into it more deliberately?
- What one specific act of obedience has the Lord been pressing on you that you have been delaying?
- Who in this group could you ask to walk with you in that obedience this week?