

What Do You Make of This Guy?

Mark 3:20-35

Introduction

Have you been in the situation where you've got the wrong impression of someone? Much comedy comes from someone being mistaken for someone else or being mistaken for having a particular knowledge or ability. The Mr Bean movie is partly based around him being present as an art expert but there are also times in the movie when he is mistaken for a terrorist and a doctor. While it may be funny in comedy it can be more distressing in real life.

I was speaking with Alex Pocock during the week and he talked about his difficulty in staying awake in lectures because of an illness. However, despite his struggle to stay awake Alex knew his topics very thoroughly. Apparently some of Alex's classmates thought he was an idiot until they heard him give a presentation.

However, it's one thing to misread who someone is because of a mistake and it's another thing to deliberately ascribe wrong motivation or character to a person when that person has performed positive actions.

Yesterday a number of people attended Safe Ministry with Children training at Hatton Vale and one of the ways we make our churches safe is by looking out for grooming behaviour. Grooming is where a person is deliberately preparing a young person, and also adults who care for the young person, for an improper relationship. However, it was pointed out that 80% of the actions which a person who is doing the grooming will be the same as any other person and I actually think that the percentage would be higher. As such, it's important that when we see behaviour that goes against our guidelines we correct it while making no assumption as to motive.

Think about the following scenario and what I'm describing. "The man made me feel special. The man really listened to me and my problems and sought to be a listening ear. I loved it when I was the last person to be dropped home at night so I could spend more time with him." What am I describing? Some people may think I'm describing grooming behaviour but I'm actually describing my relationship with my mentor and the man who has had more impact on my life and ministry than almost anyone else. Would Stuart, my mentor, do ministry in the same way today as what he did 25 years ago? Probably not. Stuart, like ourselves, wants to be above reproach and follow best practice. However, my point is that it would actually be terribly wrong to ascribe evil motivations to this man's

character when he was actually making a tremendous difference in my life and in the lives of others.

This morning we continue to look at Mark's Gospel and we're going to see that some people got the wrong idea of Jesus by being mistaken, whereas others deliberately attributed evil motivations and character to Jesus despite the good that he was doing in healing people and casting out demons.

He's Not Taking Care of Himself (3:20-21; 31-35)

As we start this section we notice a little literary device used by Mark where he introduces one topic before examining another topic before returning to the first topic. This technique in writing is normally used to introduce two topics which have the same theme but which were separated by time or to particularly emphasise one of the stories. In this case it appears that Mark is using this technique to deal with two stories with the same theme, and that is of people's unbelief as to who Jesus is, the unbelief of his family and the unbelief of the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem.

Let's look first at Jesus' family and their unbelief. In reading this little story I'm reminded of a series of ads for McCain's Healthy Choice microwave meals from the late 90's (which to my horror I realised was 20 years ago!). The theme to these ads was of a person being called by a loved one who wanted to know that they were looking after themselves. I guess it shouldn't surprise us that eating properly is associated with "looking after yourself" in many cultures. Indeed, it appears that proper eating was part of the issue here. Let's have a look at how this story begins.

"Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'"

It appears that the family is being told that it's becoming a regular occurrence that there are such large crowds which come to Jesus that Jesus and his disciples don't even have a chance to eat. We know from The Gospel According to John that Jesus' brothers didn't believe in him and it appears that they hear of this apparently unhealthy lifestyle and decide, "That's it! He's not taking care of himself. It's time for an intervention!" It doesn't appear as though his brothers ascribed evil intentions to Jesus but they didn't believe that he was God's appointed Messiah and so thought that he was making poor choices in life. Maybe they wanted Jesus to come home and take better care of the family as Jesus was the oldest child? Whatever the case, they go to where Jesus is but then wait for him to

come out to them, as we read in verses 31 and 32, “Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’”

As a little side note, some people struggle with Mary questioning whether Jesus had lost his way and needed to be cared for. This struggle is understandable because, after all, Mary had received the direct announcement from an angel that she would have a baby and Jesus was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit and then shepherds and wise men had come to pay their respects to him along with the other amazing experiences she had. Could Mary have really thought that Jesus had spent too long in the sun and needed to be brought home so that he could be properly cared for?

Allow me to give two brief answers to this. First, the text doesn’t state explicitly that Mary doubted and thought that Jesus was out of his mind, we’re only told that she accompanied Jesus’ brothers, whom we know from John’s Gospel didn’t believe, and so you’re free to hold the view that Mary didn’t doubt. However, the second answer is that we shouldn’t be surprised if Mary did doubt at some stage. Don’t forget that Mary, like all the other Jews of Jesus’ day had a particular view as to how the Messiah was to act and how he would rescue the people of Israel. Jesus has re-interpreted what the Messiah was to do and be and what the Kingdom of God was to look like. Mary may have struggled with this and having a previous miraculous revelation doesn’t necessarily change this. Let’s not forget that John the Baptist had seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus, marking Jesus off as the Messiah at his baptism. However, later, when John is in prison and Jesus hasn’t been doing what was expected of the Messiah, John started to doubt. We read about this in Matthew 11:2-6:

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’

Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.’

Jesus doesn’t back down in regards to his teaching or his actions but he doesn’t appear to react particularly harshly to those who had genuine doubts. Rather, Jesus calls upon those who had doubts, whether it be his relatives or John the Baptist, to consider again whether they want to align themselves with him and the kingdom of God which he is bringing. We read of Jesus doing this at the end of this section,

A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’

‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’

Jesus doesn’t berate his mother or brothers but rather directs them to become his followers and so do the will of God. For those of us who ever struggle with doubts there is comfort for us here. We’re not attacked or ridiculed, we’re simply invited to come again and sit at Jesus’ feet under his teaching and align ourselves with Jesus’ teaching and accept the way God works.

Also, I know that there are people here who struggle with the pain of being rejected by their families. Jesus is both aware of such pain and he also invites us to be part of a much bigger and more permanent family. I’m thankful that I grew up knowing love and acceptance but I’m also thankful for people like Stuart who is like an uncle to me, certain women who have been aunties to me as well as having many brothers and sisters from many races and cultures.

He’s Evil and Dangerous (3:22-30)

While there is a good measure of comfort for those who had genuine doubts or who were genuinely mistaken in their assessment of Jesus, as we consider the other story in this section we are struck by the stark contrast as to how Jesus engages with this group and their unbelief.

In verses 22 to 30 Jesus deals with the teachers of the law who have come down from Jerusalem. Jesus had previously had disputes with local Pharisees and teachers of the law and now the big boys had arrived from Jerusalem. This time there are no questions or debate over whether healings should be conducted on the Sabbath or the kind of people whom Jesus hung out with, these teachers, having observed Jesus heal people and cast out demons make a definitive declaration. “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.’”

The stubborn unbelief of these teachers of the law is staggering! Here is a man who is clearly doing good and yet they attribute the good that he is doing to Satan. Despite their stubbornness Jesus is still willing to correct their thinking through a parable:

So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: ‘How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is

divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come.

Jesus' point here is that for Satan to be driving out Satan then the kingdom of Satan is effectively committing suicide. For there to be such a radical opposition to demons and the work of Satan to be orchestrated by Satan himself makes no sense. What makes a lot more sense is that there is one who is stronger than Satan present. That's what Jesus is referring to when he says "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." Jesus has come and tied up Satan allowing Jesus to plunder his house, which refers to Jesus rescuing people from Satan's bondage.

We now come to some of the most firm and uncompromising words Jesus ever utters, "Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

Wow! Jesus appears to be relatively gentle in correcting the thinking of those who were genuinely mistaken about Jesus or who had their doubts, but when for the people who should have known better, the teachers of the law from Jerusalem, have seen the good which he was doing in the power of the Holy Spirit and yet attribute it to Satan, then there is clear condemnation.

By the way Jesus speaks, it seems that there are two areas of unbelief that Jesus is dealing with in this section of Mark's Gospel. Jesus is gentle (but still corrects people) who see the good that he is doing, know that it is good, but are unsure about Jesus himself. However, Jesus is firm and condemning when people see the good that Jesus is doing and hold that those good acts to be done by an evil entity. The very work of God in Jesus, of bringing the forgiveness of sins, is denied and rebelled against when people deny the work of the Holy Spirit. We know this to be the issue because we're told, "He said this because they were saying, 'He has an impure spirit.'" It's one thing for people to be unsure about who Jesus is but to cut yourself off from the good that God is doing through Jesus cuts you off from being part of the Kingdom of God and the forgiveness available there.

For us today, some people do wonder if they may have committed the unforgivable sin. I would suggest from this context that this is not possible for us today. I struggle to think of anyone who is a thoroughly trained Jewish teachers of the law (i.e. someone who should know better), who has witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit working in Jesus, and who then says of Jesus, "he's demon possessed." In other words, I think this particular sinful rebellion against the Holy Spirit was only possible when Jesus walked the earth.

What is to impact us today though is that we need to remember that God wants the whole of our lives to be submitted to him. God wants us to seek to be more like Jesus in every aspects of our character. Such a submission to Jesus and alignment of our lives to him will be impossible though unless we see Jesus as God's Messiah through whom the Holy Spirit was at work for it is that Holy Spirit which directs our hearts to him. We must cling to Jesus so that the Holy Spirit will produce his fruit in our lives.

Conclusion - Lunatic, Liar, Lord

In conclusion, if any of us here have doubts, we can be assured because Jesus graciously invites people with doubts to come to him and be part of God's kingdom. However, if after examining the evidence and seeing the good that Jesus was doing in people's lives and which still occurs in people's lives through the Holy Spirit, people still want to reject Jesus as God's operative on earth who was working in the unique power of the Holy Spirit, then people should make such a decision mindful of the consequences that such rejection entails.

[pray to close]