

# Theories of Jesus

*Mark 3:20–35*

October 20, 2013

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## Introduction

We are nearing the end of chapter 3 in Mark's Gospel, and in just these few chapters, Jesus has caused no small amount of disruption. Everything he says and does is — how would you describe it? Mind-blowing. Over the top. Unique. And on the surface, if you weren't paying close attention, it might even seem egocentric. If anyone else said these things, we would think they had lost their mind.

Consider what Jesus has claimed about himself just to this point in the narrative. He calls himself the Son of Man. He declares himself Lord of the Sabbath. He presents himself as the physician of the soul, the bridegroom of the wedding. He pronounces the forgiveness of sins as though that authority belongs to him. It is no wonder that people begin to scratch their heads and ask: *Who is this man?* Different theories are starting to take shape — and it is precisely here that our text this morning picks up.

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. (Mark 3:20)

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## The Theories

### Theory One: Jesus is out of his mind.

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (Mark 3:21)

Try to imagine what his family must have been thinking. Jesus was not pursuing a career. He had no stable income. He was, by every conventional measure, homeless — wandering from town to town with a ragtag group of followers. He was associating with people of bad repute and managing to offend the religious authorities at every turn. And perhaps most stinging of all: when Jesus called the Twelve — those who would be closest to him in ministry — he did not choose his own family. I find it worth noting that immediately after Jesus appoints the

Twelve, the two groups who might have expected positions of influence — his family and the religious authorities — both show up, one calling him crazy and the other calling him demonic.

So theory one: Jesus is out of his mind.

**Theory Two: Jesus is evil — demon possessed.**

*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.”*  
(Mark 3:22)

Consider the scene from the perspective of the religious establishment. Jesus had crossed every boundary established by the purity codes. He touched lepers and spoke to women in public. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He publicly forgave sins — an authority that, in their understanding, belonged to God alone. He broke the Sabbath. And he chose the lowly and uneducated as his inner circle. From where they stood, the only explanation that fit was a dark one: he must be operating under demonic power.

These two theories — that Jesus is crazy or that Jesus is evil — are the only alternatives the New Testament presents as live options in the face of who Jesus is and what he does. And while both are wrong, you can at least follow the logic of how his family or the religious leaders arrived there. What I want to do now is look at three modern theories about Jesus — theories that are not only wrong but, unlike those first two, cannot even be honestly anchored in the stories we have about him.

**Theory Three: Jesus was a social, sometimes violent, revolutionary.**

This view has been popularized recently by Reza Aslan’s book *Zealot*, which argues that Jesus came primarily to overthrow Roman imperial power and establish a Jewish kingdom. It’s a theory, but it does not fit the text. If this is what Jesus is doing, why is he not raising an army? Why is he not preaching against Rome? Why, instead, is he healing the sick, forgiving sins, casting out demons, and pointing his finger not at Caesar but at the human heart? And why, at the climax of his ministry, does he surrender himself to be arrested, beaten, and killed without resistance? The story does not fit the theory.

**Theory Four: Jesus never existed.**

He is, in this view, an invention — a figure fabricated by his disciples or by Paul as a means of consolidating power. But people surrendered everything they had, died in arenas, were burned alive, for a fictional being? That strains credulity well past the breaking point. And beyond the New Testament itself, a number of non-Christian, first-century writers mention Jesus: Josephus, Tacitus, Mara bar Sarapion, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Lucian of Samosata, Thallus, Celsus, and the Talmud, among others. Paul is writing his letters within twenty-five

years of the death and resurrection of Christ, and he routinely tells his readers that if they doubt what he is saying, they can go speak to the eyewitnesses — many of whom are still living.

A recent variation on this theory holds that Jesus was invented by the Roman upper class as a tool to pacify the Jewish people. But think about that for a moment. You are going to pacify a people who understood God to be wholly other — high, holy, so transcendent that his very name could not be spoken — by telling them that this God has now come and pitched his tent among ordinary people? There is a good reason the people in our text respond to Jesus by calling him either mad or demon possessed. The Jesus of Scripture is so utterly unlike anyone else in history that the idea he was engineered as a pacifying myth simply does not hold up.

### **Theory Five: Jesus was a good and wise teacher who taught love and peace.**

This is perhaps the most widespread theory today — and I want to suggest it may also be the most spiritually dangerous. It is not entirely wrong, which is part of what makes it so dangerous. Jesus was good. Jesus was wise. Jesus did teach about love and peace. The error is in stopping there, as though that exhausts who he is and what he came to do.

What Jesus has been saying about himself and demonstrating through his actions reveals that he is far more than a teacher. He is a redeemer, a savior, a rescuer — the Lord, the Creator God, who delivers people out of bondage and into freedom. And if you miss that, you miss everything.

The reason I call this possibly the most deadly theory is that there are many people who warmly identify themselves as Christians, who love to speak of Jesus as a good man and a wise teacher — “don’t judge, do unto others, love your enemy” — but who have never taken the next step of allowing him to actually deal with the sin and brokenness in their lives. They admire the teaching without submitting to the Teacher. And that leaves them, for all their religiosity, still in chains.

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## **Jesus Responds**

Jesus now responds to these theories, and he does so through a series of short parables. The immediate accusation he is answering is that of the religious leaders: that he is casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons. He calls them together and speaks to them directly.

“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.” (Mark 3:23–26)

Three mini-parables, all making the same point: internal division is fatal to any kingdom, household, or power. The ancient story of Israel is a story of a nation torn in two — Judah and Israel — and brought low. The Greek conquests did not endure because Alexander’s empire was divided among his generals. Rome eventually fell to internal corruption and strife. We see the same pattern playing out around us — and even within our own nation. A house divided cannot stand.

Jesus is responding to the accusation with a kind of rhetorical judo: *If you are claiming that I am casting out demons by the power of evil, then you should be rejoicing — because that would mean evil is destroying itself.* The logic of their own accusation undoes their case.

But then Jesus moves to a fourth parable, and here the argument takes a decisive turn.

“In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.” (Mark 3:27)

There are two ways a kingdom falls: from within, through division and strife — or from without, by a superior force. Jesus has just addressed the first. Now he claims the second: *this* is what I am doing. The reason you are seeing evil pushed back, people healed, sins forgiven, and demons cast out is not because I am in league with the strong man. It is because I am stronger than he is. I have come to bind him and plunder his house.

You may never have thought of Jesus as a thief. But sit with the image for a moment. There is a strong man — a warlord, an evil prince — who holds people captive. What does that captivity look like? It looks like fear, and destructive habits of thought and action. It looks like addiction, lust, anger, pride, and chronic discontent. It looks like the grinding guilt of knowing you are never good enough. It looks like the emptiness of a life without meaning or purpose. It looks like darkness — and, at the end, death itself.

And Jesus says about himself: *I am stronger than all of these.* Not: I have come to educate those in bondage, or to give a new set of rules to those in bondage, or to provide a few comforts to those in bondage. But: *I have come to bind the strong man and rob his house. I have come to rescue the captives.*

This brings us to what I think is the deepest question lurking behind everything in this passage — what we might call the real problem of evil.

The question that many people ask today is this: if God is good and loving, why does he allow evil to exist? Why does he allow suffering? The prophets of the Old Testament, however,

pressed the question much further and in a more uncomfortable direction. They came with this message: the evil you face is not only *out there* — in the actions and words of others, in hostile powers and unjust structures. There is also evil *in here*. In the human heart. In each of us. We are not merely victims of evil; we are also its producers, exporting it into our own lives and into the lives of those around us.

Once you reckon with that, the problem of evil becomes far more acute. The question is no longer simply, *Why doesn't God end suffering?* The question becomes: *How can God deal with evil and yet still save us?* If he accepts us as we are, evil continues. If he destroys evil — all of it, root and branch — we are destroyed in the process. How do you get rid of evil without getting rid of the people who do evil?

This is the problem that Jesus is answering when he speaks of binding the strong man. And the answer he gives is not merely a parable. It is a program — one he will carry out on the cross.

Jesus binds evil when he himself is bound. All sin is judged when he is judged. He destroys death when he dies. And by doing so, God himself deals with evil — not by sweeping it aside or pretending it doesn't matter, but by absorbing it — and saves his people in the process.

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## The Unforgivable Sin

Jesus adds one final word before the scene closes:

*“I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.” He said this because they were saying, “He has an evil spirit.” (Mark 3:28–30)*

I know there is a great deal of anxiety surrounding this verse, and I want to address it plainly. The role of the Holy Spirit is to reveal Christ — to open our eyes to who Jesus is and what he has done. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is not a momentary failure or a flash of doubt. It is the deliberate, sustained rejection of the Spirit's testimony about Jesus. It is not so much an unforgivable sin as it is a sin that places a person beyond forgiveness — because it is a persistent, willful refusal of the only one who can forgive.

Jesus is drawing a line. He is saying, in effect: either I am your Savior and Lord, or I am not. Either you are a part of my family or you are not. Either you allow me to bind the strong man in your life — whatever form that strong man takes — or you do not.

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## **Conclusion**

So the question this morning is simply this: who do you believe Jesus is?

The theories are on the table. He is a madman. He is evil. He is a revolutionary, a myth, or just a very good teacher. None of these theories holds up. None of them fits the witness of the texts. And none of them — not one — deals with the real problem of evil: the darkness that is not only around us but within us.

Only one account of Jesus does that. The one he gives of himself: that he is the Lord and Savior who came to bind the strong man, to absorb the judgment that evil deserves, and to set the captives free.

That is either the most important truth you will ever reckon with — or it is not true at all.