

Eternal vs. Temporary
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 & Mark 3:20-35
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First Presbyterian, Luling

“This too shall pass.” Usually the person saying this phrase intends to be comforting. The person hearing that phrase is usually going through a difficult time, maybe an illness or a challenge at work or some significant inconvenience. And a friend or advisor is likely to say “This too shall pass,” as a way of saying, “This won’t last forever. Better times are coming. Just hang on.” It is obviously cruel to say something like this to someone who has a terminal illness, or to anyone as a way to belittle or diminish or devalue their suffering.

What this phrase reminds us is that our lives are temporary, when seen from the vantagepoint of God’s eternity. It is easy to see that some things or eras or situations in our lives are temporary. The clean state of the living room floor is temporary in the extreme. Our winter storm, though it was difficult and we perceived that it lasted a long time, it was only temporary. Likewise the pandemic. From the perspective of eternity, everything we see and everything we hold dear and everything we consider permanent, is really only temporary.

Paul, in the 2 Corinthians reading that Bill read, is encouraging the Corinthians with a “This too shall pass” idea, urging them to focus not on things that pass away, but on things that are eternal. On the inner nature, he says, not the outer nature. On the eternal, not the temporary.

That is all by way of introduction. I want to set the eternal versus temporary framework in our minds as we look at this Mark passage. Because I don’t know about you, but it’s full of disturbing things that make me squirm. It’s chock full of things I wish Jesus had not said or done.

At this point in Mark, it’s still early in Jesus’s ministry, but he’s done some healings, he’s cast out some unclean spirits who identify him correctly as “the Son of God,” he’s had some arguments with various Temple authorities, and he’s been attracting crowds wherever he goes.

You may remember from a series of sermons on Mark several years ago, that Mark is particularly fond of creating sandwiches of stories, where the two pieces of bread are one story, and the peanut butter is another story, and by pairing the two stories together, we learn more than we would have if they’d been told one after the other. This section offers a particularly fancy sandwich,

with three things fit together. The bread is his family. The meat is the scribes. And the cheese in the very middle is a tiny parable about a strong man.

Let's start at the outside and work our way in. First, his family thinks he has lost his mind. They're extremely worried about him and come to take him home, away from what he believes is his calling, and away from the crowds who have been confirming his calling, and away from the unclean spirits who have been identifying him. And at the end of the passage, he is saying something that sure sounds like he's disavowing his family: "Who are my mother and brothers?" he asks, and then looks around at those who are following him and says "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

See what I mean about disturbing and making me squirm? My family is important to me, and I know many of you would count your families among the most important things in your life. So to hear Jesus discard his family so easily is uncomfortable. If we put family into the eternal vs. temporary framework, then we realize that family is temporary. We get reminded of this, sadly every time a family member dies, and joyfully every time a new family member arrives. Temporary. Not eternal. Jesus is directing our attention to what *is* eternal, doing the will of God.

Next level into the sandwich are the scribes. Similar to his family, they accuse him of being unwell, but they go further. They say he is doing the devil's work. Jesus responds, essentially, that their accusation makes no sense, because why would the devil work against himself? Then, after he tells the parable that we'll get to, Jesus accuses the scribes of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. I want to explain this a bit. Mark has made clear that Jesus and the Spirit are one, that the Spirit is in Jesus, that Jesus is doing the Spirit's work. So when the scribes accuse Jesus of doing the devil's work, they're attributing the Spirit's work to the devil instead. That's what Jesus means about blaspheming the Spirit—equating the Spirit's presence and work to the devil. The scribes had said Jesus himself was possessed by an unclean spirit, rather than recognizing the clear presence of God's Spirit within him.

The scribes were worried about the institution of the Temple, their own status within it, and what they believed were the rules and regulations for doing God's work. I don't want to belittle that, because we have our own loyalties to the church and its ways of doing God's work. But Jesus makes clear that even the Temple was temporary, not eternal. The church is temporary, not eternal. The work of God's Spirit in healing and teaching and feeding is eternal, and that's what Jesus was about doing.

And finally, at the very center of Mark's sandwich is this odd parable about binding the strong man. If you're going to rob a strong man's house, it's not going to work unless you tie up the strong man first. If Jesus wants to "rob" the devil's house by casting out unclean spirits and freeing people, then he's going to have to disable the devil first. And only he, the Son of God, can do so. That's precisely what the unclean spirits have been recognizing—that Jesus is the only one strong enough to defeat the devil. And we know all too well that Jesus's defeat of the devil is an eternal task, or at least one beyond any time frame that we know.

In the frame of eternity, most of the things we hold dear will fade in comparison to the eternal world God has created. We attach ourselves to temporary things, rather than holding on to that which is eternal. And that which is eternal is made known in Jesus Christ.