

And 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.” And 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.

“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” – for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

(Mark 3:22–30)

Introduction

Jesus came to earth on a mission. He came to bring the kingdom of God. He came to establish the kingdom of God. He came therefore preaching the kingdom of God. As he carried this out, he chose twelve men to be with him, to prepare the disciples to be apostles who would also preach and extend the kingdom of God. And, as we are learning, kingdom-bringing and kingdom-building are not for the faint of heart.

As Jesus went about recruiting for his kingdom by preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and by demonstrating its immediate presence, he was faced with severe pressures—pressures that would crush a mere man. There are pressures from haters who wanted to destroy him (vv. 1–6). There were pressures from lovers who wanted to merely use him (vv. 7–10). There were pressures from demons who wanted to prematurely expose him (vv. 11–12). There were pressures from family who misunderstood and misjudged him (vv. 20–21).

And what did he do? He just kept on doing what he came to do: to make disciples on his journey to the cross, where he would finally and forever secure his disciples to himself. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

In this study, we are faced once again with a passage of severe conflict. This conflict came from some of the most “well-connected” religious leaders of the Jewish day. The way in which they treated Jesus was despicable and would eventually prove deadly—both for Jesus and, worse, for themselves.

But it is vital for us to see that this horrible verbal attack on Jesus was in the context of a war that Jesus was having with Satan. The slanderers were simply taking after their father, the devil (John 8:44–47). Satan is all over this scene. And Jesus alludes to this.

Jesus was plundering the kingdom of Satan for the building blocks of his kingdom. From the mine of the kingdom of darkness, Jesus was quarrying the rock on which he would build his church. He was quarrying, from Satan's domain, the foundation stones of the walls of the new nation, new Jerusalem, the Israel of God—his church (Revelation 21:14). And Satan was none too happy. This is the reason he called upon some of those who were in his kingdom to be pawns to do his dirty work. They failed to realise they were his pawns, of course. In fact, they did not even realise that they were subjects of Satan's kingdom. But, as this passage makes clear, this is precisely what they were.

But before we are tempted to get all high and mighty in our contempt for these men, we should pause. We should pause to consider that, apart from the grace of God in Christ Jesus, we too would be blind to the beauty of Jesus as we lay dead in our sins, enslaved to Satan, the god of this world. Apart from the saving grace of God, we might be guilty of the same kind of blasphemy that we see in this passage.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, thank God that the Lord Jesus Christ has saved us from the unpardonable sin. Everyone whom he saves is delivered from this.

We can learn a lot from this passage, and one of those lessons is that we do not war against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness in high places. If you follow Jesus, if you are one of his disciples, be prepared for kingdoms in conflict. And as we make disciples, integrity demands that we prepare fellow disciples for such conflict. May this passage do so today.

The Hostility of their Disposition

The section opens with a note of hostility on behalf of the religious leaders: "And 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'" (v. 22). They couldn't beat him, so they would try to blaspheme him.

The scribes, who had come down from Jerusalem, were perhaps a part of the Sanhedrin, or, perhaps were sent as representatives of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a powerful council of Jewish religious leaders who held great sway over the people.

From vv. 7–8, it seems that word had spread to Jerusalem, and with all that had taken place in the synagogues—on the Sabbath!—the religious movers and shakers back in

Jerusalem were becoming agitated, even threatened. Yes, they had been preparing the people for the coming of Messiah and his kingdom, at least *theoretically*, but now that he had come, well, that's another story.

We are told that they “were saying” (see also v. 30). That is, they were continually saying this awful thing. Cole observes, “Their venomous remark was not a sudden outburst of anger, but a sustained attitude.”

The wording of this verse could be interpreted several ways.

For example, it could mean that, having come down from Jerusalem, they came to this conclusion upon their own observation. On the other hand, it could mean that they had already concluded based on hearsay. In other words, they had an agenda, and their minds were made up without any honest investigation of the facts. I think that we have all been guilty of this, and we have probably all been the victims of this. But no one has ever been more brutally the victim of such prejudice than our Lord and Saviour. That is why he is put forth as the example for you and me.

There is much here to contemplate. But note that the result of the hostility was that Jesus died – for his sheep. The darkest of days became the brightest forever.

Missing the Obvious

There are none so blind as those who will not see. Jeremiah proclaimed, “Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not” (Jeremiah 5:21). Commenting on this, John Heywood wrote (in 1546), “The most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know.” This was the case with these biblical scholars.

Note that they recognised Jesus' ability to cast out demons. They did not dispute this reality. But, as in the synagogue, rather than rejoicing that the King had come, rather than rejoicing that powers of darkness were being bound, they chose to assault his character. If they could undermine Jesus' integrity, they would be able to destroy him and his mission – or so they thought (v. 6).

They could not question the result. It is patently obvious to everyone that those who had been demonised were no longer under the power of Satan. They could not question the result, so they questioned the source. And in the end, they chose to demonise the one delivering the demonised!

They attached the evillest of motives to what Jesus was doing. They claimed that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul, and that it is by this prince of the demons that he was casting out demons. But Jesus' response was instructive.

Indeed, Peter holds for the very example of Jesus as ours to emulate in times of unjust treatment. He writes,

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

(1 Peter 2:18–25)

Beelzebul/Beelzebub?

There is some debate concerning the correct spelling of the name translated "Beelzebul." Whichever is correct, it means "lord of flies" or "prince Baal, lord of the house" referencing Baal's house. What we do know is that the Jewish hearers, and Mark's readers, would make the cognitive association of Satan. Mark makes this clear when he records, "by the prince of demons he casts out demons."

We will see the significance of this later, but for now, keep in mind that this has all the makings of a turf war. Two houses were coming into conflict: the house of Satan, and the house of God.

Jesus opponents were claiming that he was not from God, but from the devil. He was not Messiah, they claimed, but an imposter. He was not to be believed, he was to be destroyed. He was a phony and not to be followed but to be forsaken. He was not to be heard but to be hated.

In the previous passage, the family of Jesus claimed that he was deranged. In this scene, the scribes claimed that he was demonic. The disciples were getting some exposure to what they should expect if they chose to follow him. The disciples were getting a crash course in the cost of discipleship. As they followed Jesus, they were exposed to the

hostility that would accompany his holy mission. They would discover that Jesus Christ was a threat to man's kingdoms, including *religious* man's kingdom.

We should pay close attention. Those who profess to be biblical scholars have historically shown the most hostility to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is still happening today. Alan Cole writes, "Relatives and close friends might misunderstand Jesus; even his followers might be puzzled by him. But it was left to the theological commission of enquiry to misinterpret him deliberately. There is a calculated bitterness in their terse judgment." And, so it remains today.

I am a subscriber to Book Bub, through which I receive daily emails suggesting discounted books. Sometimes, the books are helpful to me, though not necessarily to my wallet. Sometimes, however, Book Bub promotes religious nonsense under the guise of Christianity, and discernment is needed.

If we will faithfully follow Jesus, if we are truly his disciples, we need to take up our cross and die to self. That is, we must be prepared to face hostility as we follow Jesus. Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man to follow him, he bids him to come and die."

We recently heard testimony from a missionary working in Saudi Arabia, who told of the persecution arising against Christians from the religious. A brother in a Swedish church recently shared a similar testimony – that church members rose up against him and drove him out of the church. Men like John Bunyan and John Calvin would share the same testimony. Persecution often arises from the religious.

Don't be surprised. As Jesus would say in another context, "It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!" (Matthew 10:25)

The Absurdity of their Position

As Jesus points out, of course, their accusation was completely nonsensical.

And 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."

(Mark 3:23–27)

Notice that Jesus did not directly answer the charge. As in the other scenes of conflict, he asked a question that served as an answer. He forced them to think through their accusation. He forced them with the decision: “Are we going to honestly assess the facts, or are we going to stick to our self-centred, envy-driven agenda?” Sadly, we know their answer.

No Fear

In v. 23 we see that Jesus was not intimidated by these men. “He called them to him.” As in so many cases, bullies proved to be cowards. So Jesus took the battle to them. He engaged them. Forget your romanticised “meek and lowly,” wimpy ideas of Jesus. He was a man’s man. I don’t mean that he was “buff.” I mean that he was bold. He knew whom to fear, and it was not man. He walked in the fear of the Lord, and for that reason he “had favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

Jesus spoke to the scribes “in parables.” The word refers to a comparison or a figure. Jesus did this all the time. Here, he showed by a comparison, by an analogy, the absurdity of their claim. After all, if Jesus is of Satan, it makes little sense that he would behave in such a way to destroy the work of his master. (Think about that Christian, when it comes to tearing down our Master’s kingdom, his church!)

Though the lesson is obvious (presumably to readers), it was not to the scribes. Their hardness of heart (v. 5) was such that they were blind to the most obvious realities. Theirs was the attitude that says, “I know what I believe; don’t confuse me with the facts.”

What is so tragic in all of this is that Jesus came to pardon sinners. He came to forgive all sins. Yet they were deliberately refusing this. He came to plunder the kingdom of darkness, delivering sinners from the just wrath of God, including their being held sway in the grip of the devil. And yet these men, who knew so much Bible, refused to be rescued.

But this is precisely what these of Satan’s household were doing. They could have received pardon from God in Christ. They could have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son. But they chose to stay in the realm of Satan. There was nothing more that could be done for them.

Jesus’ parabolic response highlights two important issues.

First, Satan has a kingdom. In this immediate context, Jesus was making the point that he is a threat to the kingdom of darkness. He was plundering the kingdom of darkness, and this was a threat to the religious leaders. Imagine that.

Jesus introduces the word “kingdom,” so we can assume that he recognised that Satan was a ruler. This is true, of course (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Corinthians 4:1–4), and Jesus came to destroy his rule.

Everyone born into this world is born a subject of Satan’s kingdom. We are enslaved in his kingdom—both as willing subjects and unwilling victims. As much as we might try, we can’t escape this kingdom. Those in the clutches of the evil one often feel the deep darkness, the hopeless hours, the empty expectations – the despair. Yet there is no escape.

Those in the kingdom of Satan are sinners who need the Saviour. But while in the clutches of Satan, all they know is their sin. And for some, they feel the desperation for deliverance, though they do not know how. They feel the desperation of destructive habits and destructive relationships. And for many, they feel the ache of guilt that gnaws at their soul. But they haven’t a clue as to how to shed it.

They may think they are free, but in better and more honest moments, they realise that they are enslaved, pawns of some force that they both despise and are attracted to at the same time. The only way they will be delivered is from the *outside*. Someone more powerful than Satan must defeat and plunder the kingdom of its subjects. That one is Jesus Christ. This brings us to the next observation.

Second, the kingdom of Satan is being decimated. I have alluded to this, but it needs to be said again and explained.

In vv. 24–26 Jesus points to the folly of claiming that he is of Satan when clearly he is decimating Satan’s kingdom. At best, he would be a traitor to his master. He highlights the further absurdity of this blasphemous appellation by saying, “And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.” What a preposterous assertion. Satan fighting himself? Satan deliberately bringing himself and his kingdom to an end? Ridiculous. And they knew it. I imagine them squirming in their tunics. But in this answer, there is a profound revelation, found in the closing phrase, “but is coming to an end.” The word speaks of finality.

Destroying the Works of the Devil

It is true that Satan’s kingdom is coming to an end—but not by Satan’s hand; rather, by the hand of Jesus, the Son of God—the hand of the King.

The apostle John, many years later, wrote, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the Devil” (1 John 3:8). And he would know; after all, he was an eyewitness.

Plundering Sinners, Plundering Satan

Mark 3:22–30

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Mark recorded several instances of Jesus casting out demons. In fact, his ministry commences with this (1:21–28). The authority that the people witnessed was the authority of the King (see also, 1:34, 39; 2:11; 3:15; 5:1–20; 6:13; 7:24–30; 16:9).

Jesus' kingly authority over the demons was because he had bound the strong man. Jesus is king, Satan is an imposter. Don't be a fool: Submit to King Jesus and reject and resist the devil.

John would also record the following:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be released for a little while.

(Revelation 20:1–3)

This revelation given to Jesus, and subsequently shared with John (Revelation 1:1), intends to show us that, when Jesus Christ came to earth, he bound "the strong man" and immediately began to "plunder his house." Don't you love it?

Satan is bound. That does not mean he is not active. In fact, the scene before us proves that he is *very* active! Peter adds that the devil "walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour," and charges us to be "sober" and "watchful" (1 Peter 5:8). But though he walks about, he does so restrained by Jesus Christ, the Son of God – our Saviour.

Our Saviour is King. Our Saviour is mighty. Our Saviour came as a warrior (Psalm 45:1–5). He came to defeat the devil and his minions and to ransom those who were for so long held in bondage to him to the fear he arouses – primarily the fear of *death*. Our Saviour-King accomplished this by his death. Yes, what looked like defeat was in fact the means of victory. The writer of Hebrews makes this point when he writes "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:14). In the words of Jesus, he bound the strong man and then plundered his house. He plundered Satan's house right before his very eyes.

Paul picked up on this theme when he wrote to the Colossians:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to

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the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

(Colossians 2:13–15)

In South Africa, it is an all-too-frequent report that homeowners are bound while evil men plunder their house. Some of our church members have experienced this, and it is a horrible experience. But here, it is a wonderful thing!

The enemy of our souls, the liar and the murderer from the beginning of human history, the one who has wreaked such havoc in God's world, is bound, and his illegitimate kingdom, his house of hellish horrors, is plundered by the captain of our salvation. And there is absolutely nothing that Satan can do about it. He is bound by the strong man. This strong man is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1). This strong man is God in the flesh, who is now at the right hand of the Father in heaven. I am reminded of Martin Luther's encouragement: "Even the devil is God's devil." The devil is not sovereign, God is. And Jesus is God! Thank God!

In which kingdom are you? To which household do you belong?

Christian brother and sister, be emboldened by the good news. Be strengthened today by the gospel that our Saviour is the Lion who roars and raids the kingdom of darkness. He rules. Satan is ruined. The Lord delivers us from the mouth of the lion (2 Timothy 4:17) *by* the Lion (Revelation 5:5). As Paul encouraged the Roman Christians,

Brothers, watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

(Romans 16:17–20)

The goods plundered are those who had were once enslaved to the devil and his demons. He secured these goods by defeating the owner of the house of horror, the kingdom of darkness. Jesus has done this. Satan has been bound. The kingdom of God has come. Hallelujah, what a Saviour!

Death, be not proud! Brother, sister, don't allow discouragement to morph into despair. You will face sinful habits, unbelieving loved ones, a sense of a hopeless culture, and

challenges in the church local and at large. Keep preaching the gospel. There is a lot more plunder to be secured by the King.

The Vulnerability of their Position

If they were honest, the scribes would realise the vulnerability of their position. Our text continues Jesus' words:

“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” –for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

(Mark 3:28–30)

The Unpardonable Sin

Jesus brought to the surface, for all with eyes to see, the absurdity of his critics' position (vv. 23–27). Mark makes clear the hostility of their disposition (v. 22). These closing verses serve to highlight the vulnerability of these men, as well as the perversity of their disposition. They crossed a line. They were on the wrong sided of the line. They were on the side of hell, with little chance of escape, with little if any hope of rescue. That one who had come to rescue (10:45) had been rejected – perversely so. Irreversibly so, it seems. They had committed what had become referred to for centuries as “the unpardonable sin.” And to die unpardoned by God is to die rejected by God – forever. This is serious.

What, exactly, is the unpardonable sin? According to Jesus, it is to credit the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. Kent Hughes writes, “It is the ongoing, continual rejection of the witness of the Holy Spirit to the divinity and saviourhood of Christ. It's the perversion in the heart that chooses to call light darkness and darkness light.”

A major moment in Mark's story is 1:9–11. The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus of Nazareth indicating that he was the Son of God (1:1). The proof is that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he resisted the temptations of Satan (1:12–13). It was here, I believe, that Jesus, the strong man, bound Satan.

From here, Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, preached with authority and forgave sin. He did all of this by the undeniable power of the Holy Spirit. And the religious leaders deliberately dug in their heels of unbelief to the perverse extreme of attributing Jesus' work to Satan. They crossed a line. They would die unpardoned and unplundered. The house of Satan would be destroyed and they would be destroyed with it.

What about you? Understand that this particular sin cannot, in this way, be committed by anyone. This was for those in a unique time, who were confronted with physical evidence in Jesus Christ.

But there is a sense in which one can cross a line. One might resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit to repent and believe on Jesus Christ for the last time. That is, he may stop trying to persuade you. And then you will die in your sins. Respond while he calls upon you.

By being reading these words, you are culpable and therefore vulnerable, if you do not bow the knee to the King (see Psalm 2:11–12). Therefore, repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Pardoning Sinners

We have seen much about Jesus plundering Satan's kingdom. But we need to be reminded that this is inseparable from his pardoning sinners. And therefore v. 28 is where we should close our study. This is one of the most promising verses in all of Scripture: "Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemy they utter." What a gloriously comprehensive promise!

This is the first "truly" statement that Mark records. The nature of this and other occurrences is a self-conscious authoritative declaration. In other words, Jesus is saying, "Because of who I am, listen carefully – your life depends on it." And, in the context, this is particularly striking.

The religious leaders had called him a liar. They had sought to discredit him. He didn't cave in. On the contrary, he pushed back, telling them that he was speaking the truth and would continue to speak the truth despite their perverse unbelief. And what is this truth? The gospel!

Jesus told them that God forgives sinners. He told them that God forgives all sinners, and all kinds of sins – even blasphemies. Yes, there is one that won't be forgiven, but it is rare. And since neither you nor I lived in the day of Jesus, and since neither you nor I are first-century Jewish scribes, v. 28 applies to us.

The question is not, have you committed the unpardonable sin? No, the question is, will you confess that you are a sinner who needs the Saviour?

You may have blasphemed God's name, and that is a terrible sin. But this verse covers that. You may have committed adultery, stolen, or committed murder. These are grievous

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sins, but they are covered by v. 28. We must not minimise our sin, but let us rejoice that the forgiveness that Jesus offers is forgiveness to sinners.

So, unlike the scribes, confess that you have sinned against holy God. Turn from that sin by turning to Jesus Christ and asking him to forgive you, to deliver you from the wrath, the judgement of God. And he will. But he will do more. He will deliver you from the kingdom of darkness and transfer you into his everlasting kingdom.

Jesus can do this because Jesus lived a perfectly sinless life so that he could die in your place, paying the wages of sin, which is death. We know that God accepted this payment in your place because Jesus Christ rose from the dead three days later. And he lives today at the right hand of the Father to forgive all will come to God through him.

Come to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour, and experience the pardoning of your sin and the joy of being plundered from Satan's doomed kingdom.

AMEN