

Kingdoms in Conflict

Mark 3:20–34 — Part One

Mark 3:20–34 — Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat.

²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

²² 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.” ²³ And he called them to him and said to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. ²⁷ 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.

²⁸ “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter,

²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” — ³⁰ for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.

³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.” ³³ And he answered them, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

PRAY

A theology reminder: Matthew 1:21 tells us that Jesus was given his name because it means *the Lord Saves*. Jesus indeed **saves his people from their sins**. His saving work has three primary aspects:

1. He saves us from the **penalty** of sin when he dies on the cross to pay sin's price.
2. He saves from the **power** of sin by giving a new heart that loves God rather than sin — he breaks those sin-chains that enslave the human heart to love sin. Today we focus on his saving us from the power of sin, and sin's strongman, Satan, who would keep us bound in slavery to sin under death's reign.
3. Then ultimately, we will be saved from the **presence** of sin, as we are translated from this life to the eternal state. This third aspect also reminds us that we are racing unalterably to a face-to-face encounter with Jesus, our Lord and Judge. We are not our own decider of truth; there is an

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accounting coming. Those who trust Christ for forgiveness, turning from sin and self-righteousness enter his Kingdom where no sin is present; those who refuse the command to turn from their sin and trust Christ depart to pay the death penalty of sins themselves.

Now, in the Gospel according to Mark, this theme runs throughout: Jesus is the Son of God and has come to establish his kingdom. The way he establishes the kingdom is by the proclaiming, preaching, and teaching of the Gospel. We are called to repent — to turn from sin and rebellion and self-righteousness to believe the good news that God, through Jesus Christ, has come to save sinners from the penalty, power, and presence of sin. That authoritative message is Mark's Main Thing.

The crowds which are often disoriented to the Main Thing clamor for miraculous healings. He **does heal** them and so authenticates and demonstrates that he is Lord over the physical world, including our physical bodies. He restores physically what was broken and corrupted by the fall in Genesis 3. Blind eyes see. Lame legs walk. Shriveled hands stretch. He also casts out demons and silences them, thus demonstrating his authority over the spiritual realm — things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. All creation is subject to him; He is Lord, preeminent over all things.

In vs 7–19 Jesus calls, disciples, and sends out on his mission the disciples who were appointed apostles. Now, in v. 20 he returns to Capernaum, possibly to Peter's house, for continuing ministry. The crowds are immediately back so that Jesus and those with him can't even sit down to eat.

Mary, his mother, and the rest of his family get wind of it, and we get some insight by their response into their understanding of who Jesus is. They don't grasp that he is the Son of God — they think he is delusional, he is out of his mind. It's a fascinating look into the life of those who lived with Jesus as he grew up. This is not the only time that Mary doesn't fully understand who Jesus is or what his mission entails. When he is in the temple at 12 they don't grasp his assignment to be about God the Father's business. At the wedding feast in Cana Mary wants him to perform a wine-making miracle before his time has come. We note that his own family, including his mother Mary, had to be saved and delivered from sinful unbelief. The false doctrine of the Roman Church that Mary was without sin is nowhere supported in the scripture. Highly favored? Yes. Sinless? Of course not. There was only one sinless person; he is Jesus. Everyone else needs saving, needs rescue, including rescue from unbelief through the gift of faith that he gives. We will deal with this more next week.

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Our passage begins and ends with his family, but has this big, evil scheme in the middle hatched by the Pharisees. To put both family and Pharisees in context, what we see is failure on both sides to grasp the nature of God's kingdom. His family fails in unbelief to understand that he is establishing the eternal Kingdom of God and thinks him demented. The Pharisees fail to believe that he is God, and they accuse him of being demonic. Demented or demonic? He is neither. He is Lord. The authority of his teaching, the miracles, and his authority over all spiritual forces prove that.

We will come back next week, Lord willing, to consider his mother and brothers and see that he is creating the new eternally enduring family of God that transcends even the deepest earthly relationships.

For this middle section, though, let's recall the last thing we heard from the religious leaders. In v. 6, after the man with the shriveled hand was healed on the Sabbath, the self-righteous Pharisees, who love the praise of men, who love their place and their position, who are building their own kingdom, took counsel with the Herodians how they might destroy him. We see in v. 22 that the scribes were also involved.¹ After v. 6 they plot to kill Jesus while Jesus goes out to call and send his disciples.

They can't deny the healings. Huge numbers have seen it with their own eyes. If you haven't see it personally, you've run into someone in the market who's the father, or cousin, or neighbor of someone who was healed — and there they are, these formerly lame people running around. So, no, you can't deny that. And as Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God he is casting out demons, undoing and defeating Satan's kingdom — the dominion of darkness. The curse is being reversed. They can't deny that those who had been possessed by demons are now free of deadly, destructive control. No, they must figure out a way to discredit and destroy him in light of the realities of his ministry.

In a way this sounds like it could be a contemporary political hit piece: they construct lies. They characterize the good, life-giving, darkness-defeating work of God as being evil. That's what they say in v. 22. They ascribe the very work of God himself to Satan.

v.22 — 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.”

¹ Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes — these are orders or groups of religious leaders of the 1st Century Jews who had overlap of beliefs in some areas but diverged on many topics and took very different approaches in their relationship to Rome. It is reasonable to think all these groups collaborated against Jesus to varying degrees with the Pharisees and Sadducees taking the lead.

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This is the most wicked, most evil thing they could have said. It gives an immediate window into the profound darkness of their hearts and their hatred of the God they pretend to know. They see and know the good of demonic powers being cast out, but they hate the son of God so much that they call him Satan. Beelzebul was a name for Satan which means *lord of dung*, or *lord of flies*. It's as profane as they can get. They are hoping to leverage whatever influence they have as religious leaders and convince people, in as repulsive a way as they can, that Jesus is just a high-ranking devil throwing out lower ranking devils for show. The Son of God, who is Creator of all things, who the Author of Life, the Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Savior of mankind — these evil men lie and call him the destroyer of mankind.

It is in this context that one of the famously troubling statements by Jesus is made. In v. 28, 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." Other translations use the term "unpardonable sin."

A frequent question people ask is, "Have I committed the unpardonable sin?" They see the sin of their lives and know it is offensive to Holy God and they want to know if they have crossed the line where forgiveness is no longer available. It is clear from this context that Jesus describes the unforgivable sin as taking the works of God — and we note the trinitarian nature of the ministry here: Jesus points out ***the Holy Spirit is blasphemed***, so we know the Spirit is at work in and through Jesus' ministry — when you see and know Holy God's work and yet smear it with sinfulness, and say it is the evil work of the devil, this is beyond the scope of salvation. J C Ryle describes the unpardonable sin as being "a combination of clear intellectual knowledge of the Gospel, with deliberate rejection of it and willful choice of sin. It is a union of light in the head [knowledge of God's Gospel] and hatred in the heart." Understanding the assignment of the Holy Spirit to convict the world concerning sin and righteousness, as John 16:8 teaches, if the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin and you ascribe that to Satan, what hope do you have? You are utterly disoriented to God and call value evil as good, and good as evil.

Have you committed the unpardonable sin? It is as sober and serious a question as can be asked, but it is likely that if you have concern about offending holy God, you have not utterly rejected his holiness and righteousness, or knowingly lied about his character, saying he is actually the Devil.

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This is not to say that sin at all levels, as long as it is not this “big one,” should allow for carelessness in our repentance. All sin leads to death, and Jesus died to pay the price for every sin. Further, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to convict us of the very sins with which we have grown comfortable in order that we may turn from death produced even by cherished sins to life in Christ. It is presumption to say, “Well, I haven’t done the big one, so I’ll let the rest ride for another day.” You do not know what a day may bring. If you are God’s child, he will use whatever means necessary to destroy the sin that destroys you. We are to repent of all sin immediately. It is merciful, steadfast love and grace that God calls us to himself. He does not owe it to us. Our God is a consuming fire. Let us heed his calls to forsake sin lest he stop calling. But let us also find comfort in his grace that does not abandon us to our sinful lust, though we deserve such abandonment. He continues to call, with outstretched arms, saying, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.”

Now Jesus tells a parable about the sin-conquering, Satan-defeating work he doing. Satan does not cast out Satan. What benefit would he gain from that? If Satan’s house is divided against itself, the effort he engages in to destroy Adam’s race will fall apart. But there is one who defeats Satan’s work.

Jesus describes Satan as a strongman who has a house full of goods. The strong man is Satan and the goods in his house, his domain, are the souls of people who are in the grip of sin and under the power of sin Satan’s reign. They are people in the grip of sexual immorality, idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, liars, swindlers, gluttons, gossips, self-focused, and “good people” who self-righteous, like the Pharisees. It is a powerful picture of life apart from Christ. Sin and death reign. The parable does not parse out Satan’s death grip from our sinful nature as Paul does in Romans, but simply paints the picture that apart from Christ we are enslaved to the power of sin and Satan, we are in the grip of death, and we are citizens of the City of Destruction, not the Celestial City of God.

There is no escape from sin and its grip apart from binding and defeating Satan. Those in the grip of the strongman need a Rescuer. The essence of slavery is that you cannot deliver yourself. You are captive to your enslaver. The strongman’s desire is your destruction. It is death, not life, that he seeks. But in an insidious way the father of lies capitalizes on our innate rebellion against God and convinces the slave that the ways of death actually bring life. It is the opposite of reality. It is the same lie the Pharisees deployed in their attempt to destroy Jesus. This is what spiritual death and blindness looks like.

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Hear this: Jesus has bound the strong man. He alone undoes the work of Satan. Those hearing this parable would've understood clearly what was being said. Let us also hear that as it was with them, we are unable to rescue ourselves from the chains of sin. We are born captives in the dominion of darkness under the strongman's reign. Self-improvement will not free us. Moralism will not emancipate us in any way from the strong man's claim on our soul. Attending church will not bind the strongman. It takes the work of one mightier and stronger than the strongman. Jesus, our champion, has disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. This is our Savior! The beloved Son of God binds the strongman, he breaks the grip of sin, not only saving us from the penalty of sin but also from its power as he plunders souls and delivers them from the dominion of darkness into his kingdom. He is our Savior. There is no other.

How we need to feel this and be stirred by this! I'm not just talking about being saved, as entry into God's kingdom. This is victory over sin for every believer. This is why **1 Corinthians 6:9b–11** says, Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you.** But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. There is power in Christ's plundering of Hell that sets captives free by giving them a new heart. He saves from the wages of sin by dying on the cross, and frees from the power of sin by rising from the dead!

How does one find such freedom? Someone says, "That sounds good, Pastor, but I know the dreadful state of my own heart and soul. I don't love God, and I don't hate sin as I should. Do you really think there's hope for me?" On the authority of all the scripture I can say to you that Jesus says the one who comes to me I will in no wise cast out. God delights to free the captive, and he does it through the saving work of his son on the cross.

"What must I do?" Jesus told us in his first words in this gospel. Repent — turn from sin and believe in him. It is that simple. I plead with you to run to Christ. The strongman is defeated by Christ. Your Champion calls, and new life is full and free in Christ alone. Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be white as snow. Trust Jesus and live.

PRAY