

BINDING AND PLUNDERING THE STRONG MAN  
Mark 3:20-35; Proper 5B; Pentecost 3B; June 8-9, 2024

Jesus was **out of His mind** and **possessed by demons**. That's what Jesus' immediately family and the scribes from Jerusalem thought.

A delegation from Jesus' family, including His mother and brothers, wanted to pull Him out of the crowds that surrounded Him because they had demanded so much of His attention that Jesus didn't have time even to eat meals. His family was concerned for His health and wellbeing. On the other hand, the scribes from Jerusalem, after considering what Jesus had said and done up to that point, said that Jesus was a worker of evil, possessed by a demon named Beelzebul, "Baal-Lord of Flies" They accused Jesus of having power over demons because He was working hand-in-hand with Satan.

What had Jesus been saying and doing that His own family thought He was crazy and the scribes accused Jesus of being evil incarnate? What do we have in Mark's Gospel up to this point?

After Jesus was baptized, He began preaching that people should repent of their sins and believe that He was bringing them the good news of God's forgiveness. He gathered disciples who believed His teaching, designating twelve of them as His apostles. Jesus did many miracles: casting out unclean spirits; healing Peter's mother-in-law of her fever on the Sabbath, as well as many other healings, some of them also on the Sabbath Day, the Jewish day of rest. (We heard about this last Sunday and Jesus' disagreement with the Pharisees over God's intentions for the day of rest. The Pharisees decided then that Jesus needed to be destroyed, done away with, in order to stop Him from violating their understanding of God's Law.)

As we evaluate the things Jesus said and did – the very things that led His family to think He was crazy and the scribes to condemn Him as evil – we can't help but notice that they were gospel things: God working the forgiveness of sin and faith in Jesus; God releasing people from slavery to evil and illness: God bringing them into His household. Mark introduced and summarized what was happening: **Jesus came...proclaiming the gospel** (good news) **of God** (1:14).

Before getting back into our text for today and Jesus' responses to His family, who thought He was out of His mind, and the scribes, who thought He was evil, we need to remember that this is the same Jesus we confess as our Lord and Savior. If Jesus was out of His mind then, it would be crazy for us to trust His good news now. If Jesus was working evil then, we should avoid Him now. But, if Jesus is not out of His mind and He is working the good God wants for us, then we won't let anyone or anything take Him from us. We will continue to gather around Him as His disciples to hear His Word and receive His gifts that forgive, heal, and set us free from the sin, sickness, and evil that is in us and the world we are in.

Let's look first at the scribes' accusation that Jesus was working evil. **“He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “by the prince of demons He casts out the demons.”** As we have seen in Mark, Jesus' words and deeds demonstrate just the opposite. He is God's Son, not evil incarnate. Earlier, John the Baptist had called the scribes and Pharisees to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and they ejected that call. Jesus then began His public ministry, said the same things, and they refused again. They lashed out against Jesus, accusing Him of being sinfully evil, the thing they were being called to repent of.

How did Jesus respond to their accusation of being evil? **“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.”** Jesus pointed out to them that their argument made no sense; it would be counterproductive for Satan to fight against himself to achieve his goals.

As I noted in my summary of Mark's Gospel up to this point, everything that Jesus had said and done was overcoming sin and evil in the world and establishing the kingdom of God. Jesus came to set people free from their sins by forgiving them, to release them from their slavery to sickness and possession by evil spirits and give them His Holy Spirit. That is not the devil's work.

Jesus emphasized His point with an illustration. **“No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder (forcefully take) his goods, unless He first binds the strong man. Then indeed He may plunder his house.”** By the “strong man,” Jesus means the devil. Jesus is the Stronger One who came into this world to defeat the prince of this world, Satan. When the devil **bruised** the heel of the Seed of the Woman, Jesus, the Son of Mary, at the cross, what looked like victory for the serpent was actually the bruising, or crushing, of his head. By Jesus’ death and resurrection, He bound the devil and plundered his goods.

This is good news for us. We in our sin and unbelief used to belong to the strong man, the devil. We were the devil’s goods, possessions under his control in his house, until plundered and freed by Jesus.

The Rite of Holy Baptism makes this point. “The Word of God... teaches that we are all conceived and born sinful and are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own. We would be lost forever unless delivered from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. But the Father of all mercy and grace has sent His Son Jesus Christ, who atoned for the sin of the whole world, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” When we are baptized into Christ, we renounce the devil, all his works, and all his ways (*LSB* 268, 270).

This brings us to what I think is one of the most difficult sections of Scripture, God’s Word: on the sin against the Holy Spirit, which Jesus says is “unforgiveable.” **“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes (speaks evil) against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”**

Don’t we believe that Jesus came into this world, suffered, died on the cross, and rose to life to forgive all sins? Hasn’t Jesus forgiven every sin that has even been and ever will be committed in this world, from the fall into sin by Adam and Eve through the last baby conceived in sin at the End of the world, without exception? How can it be that the sin of **“blasphemy against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness”** and the person who commits it is **“guilty of an eternal sin”** that damns him or her to hell forever?

Mark explains what Jesus meant: **for they had said, “He [Jesus] has an unclean spirit.”** The sin against the Holy Spirit is not only a lack of faith in Jesus. It is the sin of rejecting Jesus while knowing by what He said and did that He is God’s Son and Savior. The scribes knew that Jesus was not casting out evil spirits by the power of Satan. By calling Jesus evil, they spoke evil of God the Holy Spirit and His work of calling them to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus for their salvation. The “sin against the Holy Spirit” is unbelief, a lack of faith in God, but more than simple unbelief. It is the hardening of someone’s heart against God and His Word of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, claiming it is false while knowing it is true. You and I are not in a position to decide if others have committed this sin, which will be revealed on the Last Day. We are not God and don’t know what’s in their hearts, but we are warned against committing it.

When God’s Word of law convicts our hearts and condemns us in our sins, and we realized our sinfulness, knowing that we don’t deserve God’s forgiveness but only His eternal condemnation, that is the work of the Holy Spirit. We realize that our sin led to Jesus’ suffering and death in our place, and we feel horrible about it. If we, at that point, think that our sins are too big or too many to be forgiven, know this: that is not the Holy Spirit, but the devil leading us into despair. There are no sins too big for God to forgive. We may feel like we are unforgiveable, but God still loves and has compassion for us sinners and forgives us for Jesus’ sake. The Son came to set us free.

Jesus’ mother and brothers came to take Him away because they thought He was out of His mind. How did Jesus respond to that? He asked rhetorically, **“Who are My mother and My brothers?”** **And looking about at those who sat around Him, He said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”**

The family of God gathers around Jesus where He has promised to be present to save us: in God’s house where His saving word and deeds are done. We are told that after Jesus rose from the dead, His mother and brothers came to their senses and believed in Him (Ac 1:14). Today, we give thanks that Jesus has bound Satan and plundered us from his house of doom and death so we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.