

December 26, 2010

He Came to Bind the Strongman

Mark 3:22-30

INTRODUCTION

In the most famous of the Chronicles of Narnia—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—you may remember that Aslan had been on the move and winter had been melting when the Witch realized that she had a traitor to Aslan on her hands, Edmund, and so Aslan struck the deal that sent him to the stone table as a substitute for the guilty. And just then a final battle was staged (or at least she thought it was going to be final) to complete the wicked plan to conquer Narnia forever. And what did Aslan do first when he rose? He took the girls to the castle of the Witch and plundered it in time to destroy her and her army. Now what valuable goods of the Witch did Aslan plunder when he entered the dark castle? It was all of his subjects who were made subjects of the witch. And by breathing on them, he raised them to life so they could join him in the battle against the Witch. In the power of his rising, those he breathed on rose to life to reign and rule with him throughout the rest of the course of the Chronicles of Narnia until the Final Battle. Hold all of those thoughts.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has been on the move and the powers of the devil retreating everywhere He moved. You would think that the opponents of Jesus—whether humans or evil spirits—wouldn't have the audacity to stand in his way as He comes to reclaim his territory. But I personally believe that God ordains this opposition to show us the tension between the personal forces of good and the personal forces of evil in a way that couldn't be seen in an ordinary sentence. We'll see three angles of this conflict of kingdoms:

- KINGDOM PROPAGANDA
- KINGDOM PROOF
- KINGDOM PARDON

The Big Idea is that wrong views of the kingdom will keep you from plundering the devil's house.

Reading the parallel account in Matthew 12 is hugely significant here. It is only slightly fuller; but it contains a few crucial things the Mark account does not. I'm not saying you "can't get anything" out of Mark 3:22-30 without having the Matthew 12 account side-by-side. But there is so much *more* you can get reading both together. Let me mention four things in Matthew 12 that will provide a fuller backdrop. *First*, there was a demon-possessed man who was also blind and mute (and Jesus healed those by driving out the demon); *Second*, this caused people to start being even more specific about who they thought Jesus was; *Third*, Jesus claims that if his critics are wrong—and it's by God that He casts out demons—then that means that the Kingdom of God has come; *Finally*, there is more information given about plundering the strongman's house and his people gathering with him.

DOCTRINE

I. KINGDOM PROPAGANDA

A) Why the Establishment Raised the Stakes in Discrediting Jesus

1. Now these are scribes mentioned, but it makes the point to say that they *came down from Jerusalem (22a)*. Coming down from Jerusalem was a phrase used in the Gospels and in other rabbinical literature to emphasize the seat of religious authority. Matthew's Gospel includes the Pharisees by name [12:24]. And this episode is in response to a particular exorcism that led people to ask, "Can this be the Son of David?" [12:23]. Now scribes and Pharisees didn't care much for the real kingdom of God, but when somebody used words like 'Heir to the throne of David,' well, those were fighting words! Now Jesus of Nazareth really did have to be stopped! The local authorities weren't getting to him—like when the Mormons send the elders over to talk because the missionaries are in danger of getting converted, so they have to call for backup. Tactic number one for the Jerusalem theologians: use their weight to smear Jesus by spreading the word around—notice it says *were saying (22b)*—in other words an all-out propaganda campaign against the ministry of Jesus.

B) How the Establishment Raised the Stakes in Discrediting Jesus

1. What was the nature of the charge? In short—He's possessed! They were saying, "*He is possessed by Beelzebul,*" and "*by the prince of demons he casts out the demons*" (23). Most scholars agree that **Beelzebul** is just a synonym for the prince of demons, or Satan himself. It is the New Testament times version of *Baal-zebul*: the word *ba-al* means either "lord" or "husband," and it was the chief name used of the god of the neighboring people of the

ancient Middle East. So they would each begin with the title ‘ba-al.’ Now the particular chief god of the Philistines—who gave infant Israel the most trouble—was named *baal-zebub*. Naturally this false god would be the most disgusting in the memory of the Jewish people and so it is the name they tended to use for the head demon, who came to be revealed as Satan or the devil. *Baal-zebul* is a more Greek twist to it: and the word literally comes to mean “lord of the dung” or “lord of the flies” or even “lord of the house,” which, that last one would make a lot of sense given the imagery Jesus is about to use.

2. Just as in past showdowns, if the enemies of Jesus were deliberate about opposing Jesus, Jesus was much more deliberate about turning them into his foil. It says, *And he called them to him (23a)*. These guys were talking about Jesus everywhere behind his back, like cowards; but Jesus said, in effect, “Theological symposium—high noon, center of town—Be there!”

II. KINGDOM PROOF

A) Jesus’ Use of a *Reductio Ad Absurdum* Argument

1. There are two mini-parables here—*said to them in parables (23b)*—and an anchor that explains what he’s driving at in both parables: *How can Satan cast out Satan? (23c)*. A *reductio ad absurdum* argument is just one where you assume the premise of your opponent and then say, “OK, now here is what would also have to be true if your premise is true.” When the implications are shown to be absurd, the premise is also seen to be absurd, so you are carrying out the premise to its logically absurd conclusion. Let’s see how Jesus does this with the imagery of the kingdom and then the imagery of the house.

2. First, to the kingdom, we should understand that this is less of a metaphor than the house parable is. A kingdom (*basileia*) is just what the powers of good and evil were. One was a kingdom of light and goodness; the other was a kingdom of darkness and evil. So, yes, this is a parable; but it is an instance of a hypothetical example of something that actually is the real thing: *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand (24)*. Alexander’s would-be empire divided and Rome was more able to step into its place; and of course, Israel was divided between the northern tribes and Judah and was soon swept away into captivity. So Jesus’ parable is a well attested historical fact. The next statement that *if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand (25)*, you may remember, was quote in a famous speech by Abraham Lincoln about the divided state of America in the 1850s. Satan is the ultimate agent of the “divide and conquer” strategy: he would not subject himself to it. Now if anyone says, “Well maybe Satan is using some sort of decoy tactic. Maybe he doesn’t

mind distracting people with driving a few demons out here and there if it'll attract people to some other deluding force." Well that was exactly what the Pharisees' charge was meant to suggest. But there was something unique about this demon-retreating-conquest by Jesus. The next words finish the argument: *And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end (26)*. Two unique features in these exorcisms: First, taken together it was dramatic. He describes this as a "rising up" since there were so many and they were routed so decisively; secondly, this is described as a "coming to an end" of the devil's dominion. This was not just hypothetical speech. He is pointing out to people what was there in front of their eyes. Everything the devil does to people when he takes control of them, Jesus drives all of that back as well. Something significant of the beginning of the end of darkness was happening.

B) Jesus is Claiming this as a Sign of the Kingdom

1. What we are about to see is not to suggest that just because one kingdom has come, the other kingdom has been totally eradicated. God could have replaced one kingdom with another in the blink of an eye. He chose not to do that. But that doesn't mean that something decisive and history-altering didn't happen. Jesus says next: *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 (27)*. Now this may seem like nothing more than a continuation of the parable; but listen to the words of Matthew's account of the same: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house" [12:28-29]. In other words, when Jesus came the first time—as we said before, "in disguise" as the Servant King—He also set up his kingdom "in disguise," meaning that it doesn't just come right out and dominate with the sword and force the people of the world to compliance. It advances by announcing the justice and mercy of its King until He comes the second time by compelling force. But it is already the most real kingdom there could ever be. Now this action that Jesus performs has just been symbolized by the driving out of Satan's minions: the main act of taking out Satan himself—that would happen by the cross. But this act of binding Satan is something that Jesus says proves that his kingdom has come: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" [1 Jn. 3:8]. Now do you honestly think Jesus failed at this?

2. Now a lot of people have a hard time getting their minds wrapped around how the devil could have been decisively defeated in the first coming of Christ if he has been out doing so

much damage ever since. Nevertheless this is what the Bible teaches: “And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’ [Lk. 10:18]. And not only was the devil cast down, but also his demons: God “cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment” [2 Pet. 2:4]. Now of the third of the angels that fell with Lucifer at the beginning, the Bible isn’t clear on how many were cast further down and when. But it would seem that at the first coming of Christ—in the central work of Christ (the cross and resurrection)—these evil spirits and their kingdom were dealt a fatal blow. Besides (and this calls for some common sense) the Scriptures are not telling us that these are literal, physical, metal chains that are around beings with bodies! So the idea that Satan couldn’t do massive damage “if he’s in chains” assumes an over-literal interpretation of places in the Bible where it’s not warranted. By the Spirit of God He cast out demons during these three years, but it is the “strongman” himself that He has come to bind. John says at the end of Revelation:

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 [Rev. 20:1-3]

3. John identifies the first resurrection as the new birth in John 5, and throughout Paul’s letters and the Gospels we are told that the resurrection of the righteous (what we call the ‘Rapture’) and the resurrection of the wicked happen on the same day: namely on the day when King Jesus returns. Think again of Aslan plundering the castle of the Witch and then moving with the released captives onto the battlefield. At the new birth—the first resurrection—those who are awakened in Christ begin to reign and rule with him for the “thousand years,” or the age of the church. The fact is that most of what we have learned about last things in recent years is simply wrong. Peter tells us that when Christ comes the second time, “the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” [3:10]—does that match what you’ve learned?—and Peter also says there that when we in the church age are being made fun of for waiting for our King who still hasn’t come “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” [3:8]. There is no seven year, ten year tribulation, followed by a ‘second, second coming of Christ.’ There’s only one second coming of Christ where He judges the world and saves his own. And the tribulation and the kingdom are two things John said they were experiencing right now and

would continue throughout the church age: “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom” [Rev. 1:9]. Different views of the kingdom issue forth in radically different lifestyles. Our radical lifestyle begins with the radical lifestyle of our King. He comes to break and enter and beat up kidnappers and slave-drivers and rescue captives—and now so do we—unless none of this is intelligible to you. This is the great promise:

Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? For thus says the LORD: “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” [Is. 49:24-26].

III. KINGDOM PARDON

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 had said, “He has an unclean spirit” (28-30).

A) Four Ways to View the “Unpardonable Sin”

1. The first and second I would not recommend for psychological reasons. I also think they ignore the context. So, first, we could focus on the **ambiguity** of it: Jesus never tells us exactly what this sin is. No other verse in the Bible does either. Therefore I have no earthly idea whether I’ve committed ‘blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,’ and therefore I can have no assurance of my salvation. The second way to look at it is not much better. That is to focus on the ordinary meaning of **blasphemy**. This word means to utter something irreverent against One who deserves reverence. The Jews accused Jesus and the first Christians of blaspheming God and the things of God. So you still have the same problem of ambiguity here. You have a definition, but now you have to go back in time and think hard about all the different times or ways you might have committed this.

2. The third and the fourth option are much more helpful. The third option is to focus on the fact that Jesus is responding to a particular sin committed in a real historical setting. The Pharisees had attributed his work to the devil. In other words, this was a one-time, unique sin where Jesus was sealing their everlasting doom on the spot. Of course anyone in the future could come to agree with the **Pharisees’ assessment** as well and be equally guilty. But at least there you have a huge sign-post. The fourth option has always been the most

widely accepted. And that is to focus on the fact that what the Pharisees were attributing to the devil was not so much the work of Jesus as the witness of the Spirit in these works. In other words, the ‘blasphemy against the Spirit’ is just a **synonym for our resistance** to the Spirit’s witness about Jesus. And what that comes to mean is that only those who have died can be said to have fully and finally committed this sin. The author of Hebrews—after mentioning “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” [9:27] and that the Day is “drawing near” [10:25]: in other words, the warning suggests that there’s still hope for the reader—says this:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries [10:26-27].

B) The Real Context of the Unpardonable Sin

1. Let me recommend that option three and four are really two sides of the same coin. There is a reason why Jesus brought this sin up in this context. It wasn’t random. It was a direct response: which tells you that the essence of this sin is exactly what these critics of Jesus were doing—which means that *to resist what the Spirit is telling you about Jesus is to count Jesus as evil*. There is no neutral territory here. To have resisted Jesus up to this point in your life (if you have) is to have hated him with hostility and deliberate dishonesty. And the stronger one resists him, the harder his heart becomes. You see, we act like these warning passages in Scripture are given to neutral wanderers just doing their best to look for Jesus. But in fact the warning is given to hardened hearts that are in grave danger of becoming as hard as steel at warp speed.

As Augustine said,

There is little reason to abandon hope of reclaiming some of these persons, for among our most notorious adversaries are men destined to be friends, however little they know it. On earth, these two cities are linked and fused together, only to be separated at the Last Judgment.¹

2. And lest we gloss over it, this passage also teaches us that there is such a thing as eternal judgment since these people Jesus describes will remain guilty of an eternal punishment. And Matthew’s Gospel says it like this: “but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not

¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, (Image Books, New York 1958, fp. 410); pp. 63-64

be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” [12:32]. They will not be forgiven now, or ever. This is a terrifying truth; but terrifying truths are still true.

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – One label that the Bible calls your disbelief is the ‘blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.’ It is *not* an honest weighing of the options or a pure search for truth or mere freedom of thought. It is a rebellion against things you already know to be true. I’m sure you’ve all heard the expression that ‘there are no atheists in foxholes.’ Well there really aren’t any atheists getting into arguments against God either. There is not a single area of thought where the unbeliever can argue against God unless he assumes something about God. The Apostle Paul said that, “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them,” so clear is this knowledge that, “they are without excuse” [Rom. 1:19, 20]. You will never meet an unbeliever who is honestly and completely struggling with their doubt. Their doubts may be genuine in the sense that ignorance is real; they really are blind and blind people really cannot see. But they are blind because they are actively resisting the light of the Spirit. If you’re genuinely a Christian, you will reach a point in your familiarity with God where you will know that God is directly, consistently, in every molecule and sound wave and subconscious thought communicating his goodness to every single person you will ever meet. And then you will feel the weight of this blasphemy of the Spirit.

To the Saint – Please attend the Eschatology class. The bottom line is that you won’t be able to take much of this to heart unless you are biblically informed in your understanding of last things. Let me make our big idea more pointed: *Wrong views on eschatology will keep you from joining in the plunder of the strongman’s house.* If this plundering of the house began when Jesus came and this is the same thing as his saints reigning with him for a thousand years, and you don’t even know that, you will live a different kind of life than if you did. If you don’t believe there is a strongman’s house to loot, you won’t do it.

To the Sinner – When someone commits the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, there is always an absence of two things—real repentance and a yearning for forgiveness—so if you despise your sins and if you long to be forgiven by God and taken into his family, whatever the cost, then you can be sure that the cost has been paid and your sins can still be forgiven. It is not too late—“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” [Ps. 95:7-8]; Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near” [Is. 55:6].