

Mark 3:20-29

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

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.”

Exposition

In our last study, we observed that the giving of the kingdom mandate to his apostles reflected our Lord's giving of the Law to Moses and all of Israel. Whereas the physical nation of Israel was called to go into the world and drive out God's enemies, e.g. Canaanites, Jebusites, and so on, the apostles were called to drive out evil spirits and unbelief by means of the Holy Spirit's power, primarily centered in preaching the Gospel. We noted that our Lord's sending of the apostles into the world is unique as regards the apostles' unique role in the history of redemption, but that it also reflected the same end to which we are all called - *viz.* to be with Christ and to speak of his person and work to others within our divinely given respective vocations.

We noted, furthermore, that the Christian's life is ordained to be one of conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil. In vv. 7-12, we see that the crowds nearly crush our Lord as he is preaching the Gospel. We also see that the demoniacs are confronted and overpowered by our Lord as he heals and preaches to the crowds of people. These kinds of conflicts are what we are up against as we seek to walk by the Spirit of God and give glory to the Father in the name of his Son. In today's text, this theme of opposition to the Lord of Glory occurs again. Rather than finding home to be a place of rest and encouragement, our Lord is kept from eating (even as he was almost crushed just a few verses earlier), he is, in so many words, being called insane, and is being called a demonized tool of the devil.

Why is he thought to be “out of his mind”? Because he is more concerned with proclaiming the Gospel than he is with eating. John Gill explains:

...the kinsmen and friends of Christ, having heard of the situation that he was in, said one to another, he is in a transport and excess of mind; his zeal carries him beyond due bounds; he has certainly forgotten himself; his understanding is disturbed; he is unmindful of himself; takes no care of his health; he will certainly greatly impair it, if he goes on at this rate, praying all night, and preaching all day, without taking any rest or food: wherefore they came out, in order to dissuade him from such excessive labours, and engage him to go with them, where he might have rest and refreshment, and be composed, and retire.

But was our Lord out of his mind? Or were his critics? Think on this: God the Creator takes on human flesh, lives alongside these individuals, exercises sovereignty over the forces of nature, exercises omnipotent force over the devil and his angels, and preaches to these people that he is the king who will judge the living and the dead, who cast his enemies into the everlasting torments of hell if they refuse to repent and be saved - and their minds are preoccupied with the comforts of this present age. When the very Creator of the universe is standing in front of you, preaching that you have sinned and are in need of salvation from his coming judgment, and you think being temporarily deprived of food and drink is a worse state for a man to be in, then it is your thinking and behavior that is truly insane. The world and its troubles, the world and its joys, the world and all that is in it is passing away. To cling to this vanishing present order of things is truly insane. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? Is it not better to cut off your right hand that causes you to sin, than it is to keep your appendages intact and die forever in hell? The insane man is the one who, although he knows for certain this life is fast passing away, nevertheless clings to *it* and refuses to cling to Christ, the Lord whose food and drink in the age to come will far surpass everything we have ever and will ever taste - whose glory outshines all the glory of all the kingdoms and kings the world over, from the beginning of time until its consummation.

Thus, what is truly insane and demonic are the thoughts of fallen men. Whereas our Lord's constant obedience to the Father - through service to those in need that almost made it impossible for him to eat - is good, holy, and to be emulated, our sinful hearts think it is *madness*! Whereas the Lord Jesus' casting out of demons is the very indication that the kingdom of God has arrived among men, the reprobate identify it as demonic! The upside down and backward reasoning of fallen men is insane, demonic, and shows us the extent to which fallen man seeks to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. As our Lord demonstrates in his response to the accusers: Their minds are so bent on rebellion that they fail to see the contradiction inherent in their accusation that he is casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons. A kingdom does not build itself up in unity by destroying itself through internal conflict. How then can these men think that the devil's kingdom is attacking the kingdom of God by attacking itself? This is

absurd. But, as we've noted in our previous studies in Mark, sin is irrational, and it renders our thinking irrational.

The irrationality on display is not only implied by these opponents of our Lord (e.g. in their identification of service to God as madness) but also explicitly demonstrated by our Lord's argument. The Logos of God effortlessly reduces his enemies' claim to absurdity. He does this in two ways. Firstly, he argues that it is absurd to claim, on the one hand, that Jesus is doing the devil's work, and then claim, on the other hand, that this work of the devil consists in tearing down the devil's kingdom via exorcism! This is self-contradictory. If Jesus is casting out demons, then he is tearing down the kingdom of Satan. And if he is tearing down the kingdom of Satan, then he is obviously *not* working for the devil and by the devil's power. And if he is obviously not working for the devil and by the devil's power, then he can only be working for God and by the power of God. Since the Pharisees and scribes acknowledge that Jesus is truly casting out demons, and so our Lord forces them to see what this admission of theirs entails, implies. The Pharisees cannot simultaneously believe that Jesus *is* casting out demons and, at the same time, think that he is possessed by a demon.

Secondly, our Lord points out that the Pharisees' sons are also casting out demons. The phrase "your sons," according to most commentators, is not to be understood literally. Rather, it means something like "your followers" or "your disciples." There is some disagreement as to this second part of our Lord's rebuttal of his opponents, but it seems to me that what he is arguing is that if Satan can indeed cast out Satan, i.e. if the casting out of demons can be done by those who are demon possessed, then upon what basis do the Pharisees say their sons are casting out demons by the Spirit of God? Attributing Jesus' exorcisms to the power of the devil, while attributing their sons' exorcisms of demons to the power of God, in other words, is an arbitrary act that reveals the hypocritical double standards of judgment the enemies of our Lord continually employed.

But it isn't merely irrational thinking that is on display here, for our Lord's response to his accusers reveals the depth of their depravity, teaching us that there is one sin that is unforgivable - blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. As Geoff Thomas explains:

...the unforgivable sin is not some general antagonism towards Jesus; it is not the fact that many in Israel heard him and rejected him – "he came unto his own and his own received him not" throughout his ministry. The unforgivable sin during the life of Jesus of Nazareth was to experience the power and presence of God the Spirit and give the rationale for those mighty works to the power of Beelzebub. For such an attitude to the Spirit there could be no forgiveness.

After Thomas states this, he makes the following observation:

From the resurrection on there is no distinction between blaspheming against the Spirit and blaspheming against Christ. There is still an unforgivable sin, but now it can be directed towards either the Son or the Spirit. How do the apostles speak of the unforgivable sin? They do so as in two famous passages in the letter to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 6:4-6: "It is impossible for those who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

[and]

Hebrews 10:26-29: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"

The sin which the Pharisees committed revealed their fixed condition as reprobates. They would never be converted, never be restored to fellowship with their Creator, never be given eternal life, never escape the eternal punishment of hell.

We don't see miracles in our day, but we do see the Spirit of God working in the lives of our fellow brethren. Those who once openly defied the one true God now serve him with fear and trembling. Those who once openly encouraged adultery, homosexuality, rebellion against parents, and slothfulness now strive to remain faithful spouses, condemn sodomy, encourage children to love and obey their parents and elders, and work quietly with their hands so as to shine as lights, by the grace of God alone, in this corrupt world. Is this not a miracle? Indeed, it is. We hear of the Lord's work amidst others throughout the world. Idolaters forsaking the demon worship of their cultures, turning to Christ Jesus the Savior instead, being ostracized and persecuted even by their own families - and yet supernaturally persevering in faith, even to the point of death. We see the fulfillment of prophecy before our very eyes every Lord's Day, for God promised Abraham that the world through Abraham's seed would be blessed. And here we are - Gentiles from various ethnic and cultural heritages, thousands of years later, worshiping the Lord who appeared to Abram and commanded him to go out in search of a city whose builder and maker is God. And we are reminded every Lord's Day of the power of the Gospel. Especially today, when we have taken the Lord's Supper which has been specifically given to us and ordained for the sake of reminding us of the power of God in Christ - to remind us that by

the death of his Son, God has done what no man could ever do - i.e. conquer sin, death, and the devil.

Thus, while the warning is dire, urgent, and not to be treated lightly, let us remember what our Lord says just *before* he identifies the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as the unforgivable sin. He declares:

“*all* sins will be forgiven the children of man, and *whatever* blasphemies they utter.”

All and *whatever* are universal terms, excluding no sin or blasphemy other than the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. *Will be* tells us that there is no uncertainty about this truth. The Gospel provides sinners with certain forgiveness from all sins and blasphemies. And apart from it, there is no hope for *any* forgiveness of sins. This is why the condemnation of those who have heard is so great, for as we have already noted: There is no salvation outside of the Lord Jesus Christ whose blood atones for all sins and blasphemies committed by those who would trust in him. Are you weary, Christian? Are you bearing a conscience burdened by guilt? Our Lord tells us in no uncertain terms that for you who believe, *all sins will be forgiven*. Because Christ entered into judgment for your sake, believer, you will not enter into judgment. Because the curses against God that have sprung up from your heart have fallen upon Jesus, you have become the object of God’s boundless love through repentance and faith in the sacrificial death of Christ for you.

Application

Let us look at the following points of application, then, and, Lord willing, come to a greater understanding of our text today.

1. *There have been, presently are, and will always be many opinions about who Christ is:* There is a phrase that is repeated twice in our text today. The phrase is: “...they were saying...” In v. 21, we read: “They *were saying*, ‘He is out of his mind.’” In v. 30, we read: “They *were saying*, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” In Greek, Mark uses what is called the imperfect tense of the verb “say,” which is rendered in our text as *saying*. The word *imperfect* here means that the action isn’t complete; the action started in the past and is happening in the present. So this is important to note in our text. When Mark says that people “were saying” things about our Lord, he is telling us that this was an ongoing *saying*, a common conversation, as it were, one would find the critics of our Lord engaging in. In other words, it was not a one time event. As one writer explains:

It is most commonly the case that the imperfect verb...[is referencing] the statement of the group. [And] since groups rarely recite in unison, such statements are typically general summaries of the gist of what the group was saying rather than a specific, exact quotation of what one individual said.¹

¹ Stanley E. Porter, *The Language of the New Testament*.

So when Mark tells us that some people *were saying* Jesus was out of his mind, and that others *were saying* Jesus was empowered by the devil to cast out devils, he is telling us that this was an ongoing “conversation” among those who were not disciples of our Lord Jesus. And this is important for us to remember. There have been, there presently are, and there will always be different opinions as to who our Lord Christ is.

[And just as an aside, it is helpful to note here that our text implies that mental illness, apart from demonic or sinful spiritual activity, is indeed a reality. For while the Lord’s family says he is out of his mind, thereby attributing his actions to his being out of his mind, he does not tell them that they have thereby committed the unpardonable sin. This is to say, if being out of one’s mind and being under the influence of demons and sin were one and the same thing, the Lord’s family would have been guilty of committing the unpardonable sin. But they were not guilty of that sin. Therefore, there is a difference between legitimate mental illness and any kind of madness caused by demonic activity.

This is significant for several reasons, but I’ll only mention two today. Firstly, the Holy Spirit here teaches us that not all illnesses are related to demonic activity. In our Lord’s time on earth, there were many who of the opinion that *any* sickness was directly related to the activity of a demon. There were so many, in fact, that unregenerate biblical scholars try to find that same superstitious belief in the Bible. Yet here we see that the Bible does not teach that *all* illnesses are the result of demonic activity. For if that were the case, then, as we’ve mentioned already, our Lord’s family would have been committing the unpardonable sin by saying he was out of his mind. Yet they were not guilty of that sin. Therefore, not all illnesses are related to demonic activity.

Secondly, as there were many in our Lord’s time on earth that superstitiously believed that all illnesses were the result of some demonic activity, so there are many in our time who say the same thing. This can be a problem for the Christian struggling with legitimate mental illnesses, i.e. psychological issues arising from a chemical imbalance in his or her brain. To the truly regenerate Christian, to be told that he or she is under the influence of demonic activity, and that that’s the reason why he or she is suffering with a mental illness, is saddening, terrifying, and could very well be a hindrance to that believer’s coming to use the means of grace in his time of need for Jesus’ strength. Knowing that there is a clear distinction drawn here between, on the one hand, “being out of one’s mind” and, on the other hand, “being under the power of Beelzebub” is a helpful reminder to us that all parts of man were affected by the fall, even the proper functioning of man’s brain, which if altered can interfere with man’s mental activity. Even Christians can suffer from mental illnesses, seeing as the fall made this a possibility for all the sons of Adam. Let us remember this when thinking about such issues. And let us have grace with those who so suffer, even as we have grace and patience with those who suffer from manifestly physical problems brought about by the Fall as well.]

But to return to our first point, we see that there were many opinions about our Lord. And this becomes very clear later in our Gospel, in Mark 6, King Herod says that Christ is John the Baptist raised from the dead. And even later, we will see that disciples report more things people *were saying* about the person and work of our Lord to the three we just mentioned. They told him that some were saying that he is “Elijah...and others, one of the prophets.”² And we learn from Matt 16:14 that of the other prophets people thought Christ was, they included the prophet Jeremiah. People *were saying* many things about who our Lord is - they were saying he was insane, he was possessed by a demon, he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, Elijah the prophet returned, and the prophet Jeremiah.

You will notice that these opinions about our Lord are not derived from the Scriptures, but from the corrupt minds of men who refuse to submit to the authority of the Scriptures. And so it is in our own day. Enemies of the Lord Jesus would have you think that their opinions are new, fresh insight into the person and work of Christ unearthed somehow from extrabiblical data. But this is far from true. Their conclusions are *always* the same:

Jesus is not whom we believe him to be, but was just an itinerant preacher, a poor street preacher, a magician, a nice guy, a heinous fiend - anything BUT the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And as it was during our Lord’s earthly ministry, so it is now: These opinions about our Lord are based upon the corrupt minds of men.

But if we would know who Christ is, then we must go the divinely breathed out historical records of the New Testament and hear what our apostolic brothers tell us:

“These things were done so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled...”

Christ’s identity is clearly seen when his person and work are understood in light of the Old Testament’s prophecies concerning the Christ.

This not only establishes his identity, but reminds us of God’s Sovereignty over history, his faithfulness to do what he has promised, and the futility of the attacks of the devil, his angels, and the reprobate enemies of God.

Let us not be discouraged by the onslaught of extrabiblical anti-Christ opinions concerning the person and work of our Lord Jesus, therefore, but be encouraged. When we hear the lost men of this age, the blind teachers leading the blind, claiming that Jesus was not born of a virgin, or did not die on the cross of Calvary, or was not raised from the dead - let us remember that these are not new opinions, but the very same ones present during the time of our Lord’s earthly ministry,

² Mark 8:28.

with little to no changes! For is it not one and the same thing to Christ's family to identify him as a madman and his modern enemies to say that he was merely a misguided mortal? And is it not one and the same thing for the scribes and Pharisees to say Christ was demon possessed, and the present antiChrist enemies of God to say that Jesus is not the Son of God, the eternal Second Person of the Holy Trinity? Essentially the claims are the same.

Don't be discouraged by the daily spawned batches of unbelieving theories about Christ's person and work. There will have always been, are presently, and will always be many opinions about Christ. And only the truth, derived from the Scriptures, is what has stood, is presently standing, and will forever stand: Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who by his Words and deeds destroyed the one who had the power of death, i.e. the devil and the members of his kingdom.

2. *God Saves Men by Faith in the Truth, Not a Lie*: Note in our text today that the doctrine of the Trinity is implicitly taught. For the Scriptures identify sinning against the Son as distinct from sinning against the Spirit, and these are also distinct from sinning against the Father. We learn this from Matthew's parallel passage, where he says:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Note that our Lord teaches that blasphemy against the Father will be forgiven, and that blasphemy against the Son will be forgiven as well; but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Now if one claims to believe in the Trinity and yet says that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are the same one person, and not three coeternal and coequal divine Persons, then he is contradicting the Words of God. For Jesus tells us that blaspheming the Father is not equivalent to blaspheming the Spirit, for blasphemy against the Father is forgivable while blasphemy against the Spirit is not. Likewise, he makes the same point as regards the difference between the forgivable sin of blaspheming Christ and the unforgivable sin of blaspheming the Spirit. If the Father and the Son and the Spirit were one and the same person, just different manifestations of the same divine person, then our Lord's would be false. For in that case blaspheming the Father or the Son would be identical to blaspheming the Spirit. Thus, the person who denies the tripersonality of God implies that there is no forgiveness of sins for every sin and blasphemy, for there would be no distinction between blaspheming the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, consider: If the Holy Spirit is not equally divine with the Father and the Son but is, instead, an impersonal force, like the Jehovah's Witnesses teach, then how can he be blasphemed? Our Lord, therefore, recognizes and clearly identifies the Father and the Spirit, as well as himself, as Divine Persons against whom one may sin by blasphemy. And the problem

here for the one who denies that the Holy Spirit is a divine person, equal to the Father and Son, is the same: If one says that the Holy Spirit is merely a force of God the Father, then in essence one is saying that to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to blaspheme God the Father. And if these two acts are the same, then there is no forgiveness for anyone who has blasphemed the Father or the Son.

This may seem a bit off course, but note the final conclusion here: Those who deny the Trinity not only imply that they believe in a god who cannot forgive their sins. They also blaspheme Jesus by implying that, on the one hand, he was mistaken in thinking that blasphemy of the distinctly personal Spirit of God is different from blasphemy of himself or the Father.

We see here, albeit in a roundabout way, that God saves sinners through faith in the truth. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct Persons who are coeternal and coequal. The Father has sent his Son to redeem men through his sacrificial death on Calvary, and the Holy Spirit has attested to and continues to attest to the truth of these things. To not believe in the Trinity, then, is to not believe what the Gospel clearly teaches, and what our Lord clearly teaches in our text today. The roles of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit are distinct, unique in some ways to each divine person, and united in bringing about the salvation of sinners.

God saves sinners through faith in the truth, not lies.

3. *Satan is Strong, But Christ is Omnipotent*: In our Lord's response to the Pharisees, we note that he does not deny the existence of Satan, nor does he deny his attributes. Instead, he explicitly states:

“...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.”³

In this analogy, the devil is the strong man being bound and plundered, and the one who plunders is the Lord Jesus Christ. He plunders the devil's house, as it were, by redeeming men.

Note that it is only Christ who can do this. So while it is the case that there are many opinions about Christ which we must correct with the truth of the Scriptures, and while it is the case that we must do this because God only saves sinners through the truth, not lies, it is also the case that only Christ can truly deliver sinners from the kingdom of darkness. And we see this clearly in our text today, for even though the Son of God is casting out demons, a fact which the Lord's enemies admit, they still do not believe. Instead, they further plunge into sin by committing the unpardonable sin. The situation, as we can see, is not promising if we only look to ourselves.

³ Mark 3:27.

Thankfully, however, the Son of God is infinitely more powerful than the entirety of the devil's kingdom added together in a united front against him. Thus, they fear him who created them and they cry out:

...“What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”⁴

We are not stronger than the strong man, but we are saved by the omnipotent one and, therefore, have nothing to fear from the strong man. And we know, by this same fact, that if some are not converted it is not because of our weakness as ambassadors for Christ, for we are not stronger than the strong man. Instead, those who are not converted by Christ are those upon whom he has not set his sights to “plunder” from the kingdom of darkness.

While Satan is strong, the Son of God is omnipotent. And here it is where we find comfort when reflecting on our weaknesses in witnessing to others, or when we are tempted to think that the hardness of hearts in those to whom we have witnessed will be a hindrance to God saving them. The thought is a wicked one, but one which sometimes, sadly, we entertain. Here the Lord Jesus Christ shows us that Satan is indeed a strong man, one whom our best preaching, teaching, witnessing, holiest living, and incessant prayer cannot by itself overcome. Here we see that those who are under his dominion cannot be delivered by even our best attempts to save them. Only Christ can save them.

For while the devil is strong, Christ Jesus is omnipotent.

4. *The Kingdom of Satan Will Fall by the Hand of God:* Our Lord states that it is irrational to think that Satan would cast out Satan, for this would destroy his kingdom. But what does this imply? It implies that the casting out of demons is damaging the kingdom of Satan. The destruction of the kingdom of Satan, in other words, will be the result of God's direct attack against it. And by the preaching of the Word, by which sinners are called to repentance and the people of God are encouraged to glorify God in our various vocations, is how the Lord is currently destroying the kingdom of Satan. While we are in battle mode, as the church militant, it is important for us to be reminded of this truth: The kingdom of Satan will fall by the Hand of God.

The enemies of our Lord identify Satan as a prince, but our Lord is the King of kings. All will bow to him - Whether they like it or not.

Conclusion

Today's text contains several warnings and promises which are equally powerful. It warns us that salvation is only through the truth and that, therefore, those who deny the truth are not saved. It

⁴ Matt 8:29.

warns us of the unpardonable sin. And it promises us that Christ is infinitely stronger than Satan, God will forgive *all* sins and blasphemies (other than the unpardonable sin), and that the kingdom of Satan will certainly fall by the hand of God who will personally attack and eternally destroy his enemies.

It reminds us that Christ is perfect judge, but also our perfect Savior.

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