

# “Binding the Strong Man”

## The Eleventh in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 3:20-35; Isaiah 49:22-26*

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Jesus went out into the wilderness to create a new Israel and prepare for a new Exodus. Large crowds continue to seek out Jesus while our Lord completed his choice of twelve disciples who would carry on and extend Jesus’ mission. With word spreading throughout the entire region that a miracle-worker/exorcist had appeared in the village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, people from throughout Israel, Idumea and even the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon to the north, were flocking to Jesus. In the third chapter of his Gospel, Mark has described a very chaotic scene in which Jesus is forced to preach and heal from a boat near the shore, so as to keep the crowds under control. But there is great irony in Mark’s account as well. The multitudes seek Jesus because of his miracle-working power, while the scribes and Pharisees, hate Jesus and are plotting against him because of these same miracles. While demons immediately recognize Jesus as the Son of God, neither the large crowds nor the Pharisees understand that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. Sadly, not even Jesus’ own family understands the nature of his mission.

We continue our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are covering that part of the Lord’s ministry known as the later Galilean phase, that portion of Mark’s Gospel which runs from Mark 3:7-6:13. Recall that Jesus appeared suddenly in Capernaum and had been preaching for some weeks (perhaps months) that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus has been healing the sick, casting out demons, calling disciples and forgiving sin—all signs that God’s kingdom has drawn near. All the while, Jesus’ notoriety has increased to that point that crowds of sick and suffering people seek him out and follow him everywhere he goes. People are no longer surprised by Jesus’ miracles, they expect them.

We have also seen how the hostility toward Jesus on the part of the religious leaders of Israel continues to increase. The Pharisees were offended because Jesus ate with tax-collectors and sinners, people whom the Pharisees regarded as ceremonially unclean. And then Jesus and his disciples did not fast on Mondays and Thursdays as did the Pharisees. Furthermore, Jesus healed on the Sabbath, which violated the Pharisees’ attempt to regulate the Sabbath. Whenever the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus, he immediately exposed them for what they were—self-righteous frauds, who loved the prestige and perks of their office far more than they did the people entrusted to their care. And so even early on in Jesus’ messianic ministry, the Pharisees join with their political enemies, the Herodians, in an effort to come up with some way to put Jesus to death. What begins in the backwaters of Capernaum will culminate on a cross in Jerusalem. There is a certain inevitability of Jesus’ death, even from the beginning.

Meanwhile, Jesus goes out into the wilderness to rest and to pray. It is in the wilderness that Jesus, the new Moses, teaches the multitudes, heals the sick, and calls his disciples. When demons recognized Jesus as the Son of God, it becomes painfully clear that human sin has blinded both the crowds and the Pharisees to Jesus’ true identity. The crowds don’t care much about Jesus’ preaching or whether or not he is the Messiah. All they want is relief from their suffering. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are jealous of Jesus because crowds are flocking to him and ignoring their warnings about Jesus. Jesus does not accept their humanly-devised traditions as authoritative, which the Pharisees regard as a great insult. Despite their opposition, Jesus sovereignly calls disciples by name (and in doing so fulfills a number of messianic prophecies) and will now reveal himself to them as his messianic mission unfolds. These men will, in turn, be equipped by Jesus so that he can send them out to preach, and so that after his death and

resurrection, they will be witnesses of all the things that Jesus said and did. In fact, it is their testimony about Jesus that lives on in our Gospels and epistles which make up the New Testament.

**W**ith the sad irony regarding the knowledge of Jesus' true identity serving as the context for what comes next, Mark continues to describes the difficulties faced by Jesus, including the tragic fact that even Jesus' own family members do not understand the character of his mission.

As we read in verses 20-21, "*Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'*" This whole report is so disturbing the manuscript tradition (copies of Mark's Gospel) indicates that a number of copies actually omitted the reference to Jesus' family so as to avoid dealing with this embarrassing and troubling incident.<sup>1</sup> But, the fact of the matter is, this is exactly the kind of thing that gives Mark's Gospel the ring of truth. Even difficult and potentially embarrassing incidents are reported by Mark, precisely because they actually happened.

Mark does not tells us where and when this occurs, but when Mark mentions a home and a crowd immediately gathering, it is probably not a stretch to imagine that this is Peter and Andrew's home in Capernaum which has been serving as a kind base for Jesus. People surely would have expected Jesus to appear here, and so when Jesus showed up, crowds would have immediately gathered. This fits with what we've seen earlier in Mark 1:29-37 and in 2:1-12. Poor Jesus and his disciples simply want to find some place to eat a meal, but so many people gathered in and around the house that it was impossible for them to eat. At the same time this crowd had gathered, members of Jesus' family arrived from Nazareth, which was about 25 miles to the southwest. Apparently, they too had heard that Jesus was back in Capernaum and they have come to take charge of him. As Mark tells us, they were afraid that Jesus was no longer in his right mind. While the Greek word translated by the NIV as "family" can also mean a group of friends,<sup>2</sup> the fact that Jesus' mother and brothers are mentioned in verse 31, probably means that Mary and her sons by Joseph (Jesus' half-brothers) have come with her to bring Jesus home to Nazareth.<sup>3</sup>

This incident raises a number of difficulties. Why is it that Jesus' family would react so strongly to his messianic mission that they would come and seek to take Jesus home—the Greek text implies they came to arrest him and take him under control.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' family clearly believes that Jesus is out of his mind. Sadly, they too completely misunderstand what it is that Jesus is doing and why. This is certainly a strong indication that Jesus' messianic ministry was veiled or hidden in some sense, even from Mary, who certainly knew that her supernaturally conceived son was to be the redeemer of Israel. In Mark 1:25, Jesus has already made it clear that his identity is not yet to be revealed, as Jesus commanded the demon to be quiet about who he was. This reticence of Jesus to reveal himself has been a prominent theme throughout the opening chapters of Mark.

Some have suggested that when Jesus left his family to begin his messianic mission (just months earlier),

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 138, n. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of the traditional exegesis, see France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 166-167.

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 134.

he probably stopped caring for himself, in terms of food and rest. At the same time, Jesus began speaking of the end of the age and preaching about the coming judgment of God. According to Mark's account, Jesus was not getting sufficient rest and did not even have time to eat, as Mark has just indicated.<sup>5</sup> This deep concern shown by Jesus' family may stem from the fact that his family saw him after some months and were shocked by the change in his appearance. Under the circumstances we can understand why they felt that it was time to "rescue" Jesus from the crowds. Some have questioned how it was that Mary could have been so unaware of Jesus' mission that she now thought him insane. But it may be nothing more than a mother's desire that her son get some rest and relief from the obvious pressure and difficulties he was facing from the desperate crowds and hostile Pharisees. In any case, what is known for sure is that Jesus' own family does not yet understand who he is and what he is doing. And that is Mark's point—even those people closest to Jesus are struggling to figure all of this out.

**I**f Jesus' mother and brothers thought Jesus was not in his right mind, what follows next is far worse. Jesus is now actually accused of being demon possessed by representatives from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

This particular incident may be placed here by Mark because it fits with what has gone before—the demons recognize Jesus, while his own family thinks him insane.<sup>6</sup> Now, Jesus is accused by the religious big-wigs from Jerusalem of being possessed by a demon—words which are so blasphemous they are hard to repeat, even though they are in the text of Scripture. The problems begin when a delegation from the Sanhedrin arrives in Capernaum. News about Jesus has reached to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, to his family in Nazareth, and now to the Sanhedrin, which is the Jewish ruling body in Jerusalem. It may even be the case that Mark's previous mention of the presence of scribes ("teachers of the law") is a reference to these officials from Jerusalem. In any case, the scribes knew full-well about Jesus' power to heal and cast out demons. The scribes also had witnessed the large crowds Jesus had been attracting and may even have felt that Capernaum had become a so-called "seduced" city, a place which come under the spell of a false teacher. In their minds, something must be done to stop Jesus.

And so Jesus' enemies bring two relate charges against him, as recounted by Mark in verse 22. *"And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.'"* The first charge raised is that Jesus is demon-possessed, while the second charge is that Jesus casts out demons using the power of Satan. Let us not miss the sad irony of this. Jesus' family saw the physical strain on Jesus and thought him not in his right mind and that he needed to be taken home. The huge crowds see Jesus as a miracle worker and probably don't much care about where he is getting his power. All they care about is relief from their troubles. But the representatives of the Sanhedrin—the guys from the denominational headquarters—are so blind to Jesus' true identity that they dare to make the utterly blasphemous charge that Jesus, who performs his miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, is demon-possessed. And this is the name of stopping blasphemy! Ironically, only the demons truly know who Jesus is. Yet, Jesus is slowly but surely revealing his identify to the disciples. As I have said before, the irony here is thick and intentional.

The name Beelzebub is probably a reference to a demon-prince, since there is no known reference to

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<sup>5</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 139.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 140-141.

Satan being called Beelzebub in Jewish literature.<sup>7</sup> The charges leveled against Jesus by the representatives of the Sanhedrin indicate that Jesus is viewed as a magician or sorcerer and that his work was considered unlawful. This explains, but certainly does not condone, the desire on the part of the Pharisees and scribes to put Jesus to death. In fact, both the *Talmud* (Jewish commentaries on the law) and the writings of the church fathers, indicate that the charge of sorcery was the predominant response for several centuries by Jews to Christian preaching. Jesus was considered a magician who led people astray. Both Trypho and Celsus, early opponents of Christianity, made the same charges using Jewish sources.<sup>8</sup> Not only is this ironic, it is utterly heart-breaking that the leaders of Israel would not only reject their Messiah, but attribute his miraculous power and compassion upon the poor and suffering to demons. Such charges against Jesus, also help explain the origins of much of western Anti-Semitism.

Jesus will now address these horrible charges in the form of a parable. In the next chapter (Mark 4:11-12), Jesus will explain his use of parables. *“The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven.”* While we’ll address the meaning of this saying when we get there, the point we need to understand this morning is that parables (picturesque maxims or a proverbial sayings)<sup>9</sup> are a form of judgment upon these false shepherds of Israel, when what is clear (that kingdom of God has come in power) is now hidden from those who are outside—i.e., those who do not believe that God is present in and through the ministry of Jesus. Jesus will answer the scribes using a parable which will demolish their case against him.

In verses 23-27, Mark describes Jesus’ response as follows. *“So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: ‘How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.’”* The first point made by Jesus is simply that Satan cannot cast out Satan. When Jesus speaks of Satan instead of Beelzebub, he is making the point that this conflict amounts to an attempt by Satan to thwart his own redemptive mission. Satan would never destroy his own work. Therefore, it is virtually self-evident that if a kingdom or a household is torn apart by division, it will fall. Satan may be evil, but he’s not stupid. The prince of demons would never undo the work of his master. Thus Jesus quickly reduces the first charge leveled against him to an absurdity.

As for the second charge that Jesus uses the power of Satan against Satan, Jesus now points out to his hearers that Satan remains strong. His kingdom has not yet fallen. If you wish to rob a strong man, you need to overpower him first, then rob him. When Jesus comes and heals the sick, casts out demons with but a command he is effectively binding Satan, who is the strong man of the parable. The purpose of his messianic mission (in part) is to plunder the realm of Satan as but the first step in Satan’s total and final defeat. This will come about when Jesus dies upon the cross and the serpent’s head is crushed in fulfillment of the great gospel promise of Genesis 3:15. That Jesus can cast out demons with but a word, is proof that he has bound the strong man (Satan). This too was something which the prophet Isaiah had

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<sup>7</sup> France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 169-171.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of this in Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 142.

<sup>9</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 137; Lane, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 142.

foretold about the messianic age. As we saw in our Old Testament lesson this morning, in Isaiah 49:25, the prophet declared, “*this is what the LORD says: ‘Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.’*” This is exactly what Jesus has done in his triumph over the devil—plunder the fierce. Furthermore, Jesus’ words here must be understood in light of the fact that Jesus had just some months before spent forty days in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Jesus did indeed defeat Satan at that time by not giving into temptation. And having defeated Satan in the wilderness, Jesus moved on to Capernaum, where the darkness of Satan’s kingdom was pushed back all the more.<sup>10</sup>

In verses 28-30, Jesus uses this occasion to speak plainly (not in a parable) about the gravity of the charges raised by the scribes against the Son of God and bearer of the Holy Spirit. “*I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.*” He said this because they were saying, “*He has an evil spirit.*” The idea of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the so-called “unpardonable” or “unforgivable” sin has troubled Christians almost from the beginning of the church. There are a number of important points which need to be made.

First, although you cannot tell from the NIV, which completely omits the key term, for the first time in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus uses the so-called “Amen, I say unto you” formula. The ESV translates this as “Truly, I say to you,” which is also helpful. The use of this expression by Jesus means that what follows is quite solemn and indicates that Jesus is speaking forth the truth and revealing the will of God. When Jesus says, “Amen, I say to you,” or “truly, I say to you,” this means that we must listen to what follows with great care and seriousness.<sup>11</sup>

Second, it is vital that we notice that Jesus himself affirms that all manner of sins can be forgiven. The ground (or basis) for this wonderful promise, will be his own blood, soon to be shed for sinners upon the cross. But there is one terrifying exception mentioned—blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. From Mark’s account it is clear that Jesus was performing his miracles, healing the sick, and casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet, the scribes saw Jesus do these very things and attributed these miracles to the demonic. The scribes knew full well what blasphemy was—profaning the Holy name of God. The irony here is that because they were blinded by their sin as to Jesus’ true identity, to their way of thinking, Jesus was committing acts of blasphemy. When Jesus has compassion on the sick and suffering, when Jesus heals on the Sabbath, sadly, the scribes see that which is the work of the Holy Spirit as a manifestation of the demonic. Talk about irony. The demons recognize Jesus as the Son of God, while the shepherds of Israel accuse their own sinless Messiah of being an agent of Beelzebub. For this, Jesus places the supreme covenant curse upon them. This sin cannot and will not be forgiven.

Third, when we see out what the unpardonable sin is—the scribes were saying that “*Jesus has an evil spirit*”—it should immediately become clear that such a sin cannot be committed today. The surest sign that someone has not committed the unpardonable sin is the fear they may have committed it! These men were supposed to be the shepherds of God’s flock, highly trained in rightly dividing the word of God and applying its wonderful covenant promises to God’s people while gently warning them of God’s covenant curses. Instead, they had so buried God’s word under man-made tradition and case-law, that when God

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<sup>10</sup> See the helpful discussion in; Lane, [The Gospel According to Jesus](#), 144.

<sup>11</sup> Lane, [The Gospel According to Jesus](#), 144.

in human flesh, indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit, showed up and they were blessed with the unspeakable privilege of seeing with their very eyes God heal the sick and rescue people from the power of Satan, instead, they attribute this glorious work to the prince of demons. This is the sin for which they cannot be forgiven, and given the historical circumstances under which this covenant curse is extended, it cannot be committed today—unless you’ve seen Jesus with your own eyes perform a miracle and attribute it to Satan. It is sad that so many people with tender consciences have worried so much about something which cannot apply to them.

**H**aving shown how Jesus’ family has not understood the nature of his mission, and given the fact that the scribes accused him of being demon possessed, Jesus now speaks about those who constitute his true family. Here again, we see images of the new Israel, which Jesus is creating.

According to verse 31, “*Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.’*” Mark resumes the account which was broken off back in verse 21. Jesus was probably in Peter and Andrew’s house, now surrounded by those who were interested in his teaching (the fact that people were sitting around him implies an inner circle of sorts). Presumably, the scribes have left the house in anger. Someone now brings word to Jesus that Mary and his brothers were outside asking for him. Jesus certainly knew of how his brothers felt about him and he certainly knew that Scripture teaches that there are instances when obeying God’s will transcends family relationships.<sup>12</sup>

And so upon hearing that his mother and brothers were outside asking about him, Jesus uses the occasion to speak to the question of the nature of true discipleship and the cost of following him. “*Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’*” Jesus may have been pointing to the twelve as those who are his true family. They have dropped everything to follow Jesus and obey the will of God in doing so. These twelve men have, in a sense, become Jesus’ true family, since even his own brothers do not understand the nature of his mission, and will not believe that he is the Son of God until after the resurrection. But when Christ broadens the circle of his family beyond the twelve to all those who do the will of God—which, according to John 6:29 is to believe in Jesus whom God has sent—Jesus is speaking of the new Israel which he is now creating. In this new society, faith in Christ will determine the extent of Jesus’ true family, not biology. As Calvin once put it, Christ “receives all his disciples and all believers into the same rank of honor as if they were his closest relatives; more, he substitutes them for his mother and brothers. . . . By faith, [Jesus] is composing one body. There is no bond of relationship more holy than the spiritual.”<sup>13</sup> As Calvin sees it, God is renewing Adam’s fallen race, not only creating a new Israel, but making sinners into holy and heavenly sons of the living God. This is certainly correct.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this section of Mark?

The very fact that so many different and diverse people witnessed the miracles of Jesus with their own eyes and yet did not understand his mission or understand who he was, should remind all of us

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<sup>12</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 147-148.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Matthew, Mark, and Luke Vol. II, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, trans T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 56.

that unless God grants us understanding of spiritual things, we remain blind to them. If we now believe in Jesus, it is because he has granted us faith. Otherwise these things remain hidden.

Remember that even Jesus' own family thought him insane. His mother and brothers saw the physical strain upon him and thought he had lost it. At least they cared enough to seek to bring Jesus home. The huge crowds are a different story. Those who came to Jesus for healing were so desperate and in such dire straights that they didn't much care who Jesus was, only that he could heal them. They swarmed around Jesus to the point that he could not eat nor rest. And while Jesus had compassion on them and healed them, the crowds will abandon Jesus the moment he tells them that they cannot save themselves and that they too must take up their cross and follow him.

The Jewish religious leaders hated Jesus because he exposed their self-righteousness, rejected their man-made traditions, and ignored their false interpretation of God's word. They have already joined with their enemies, begun plotting to kill Jesus, and even accused him of being demon possessed. At this point in Mark's story, ironically, only the demons knew who Jesus was because Jesus was even then binding the strong man, although Jesus is slowly but surely beginning to reveal himself and the nature of his mission to his disciples.

The point is that when the kingdom of God arrives in the person of Jesus, people are immediately divided. The kingdom makes demands and forces all who encounter it to decide where our allegiance truly lies. As a sign that his kingdom brings judgment upon those who reject him, Jesus will speak to the scribes and Pharisees in parables, in effect, hiding the truth from them in plain sight. Jesus will have compassion upon the sick and suffering, but he's already begun the process of forming a new Israel, a spiritual family in which all those who place their faith in him thereby obeying his will, becomes his new brothers and sisters.

When the kingdom comes, you either obey Christ's will and believe his promises, repent of your sins and renounce your own righteous and leave father and mother behind to follow him, or else you remain outside, unable to understand the things of God which are hidden from the wise. Jesus rejects the self-righteous, but welcomes repentant tax-collectors and sinners. He reject the traditions of men, but rewards all those who come to him with empty hands with citizenship in the new Israel, and he now calls you his brothers and sisters and makes you an heir to all the good things he has for those who love him. And so it is with the kingdom of God.