

“SATAN BOUND”

Our passage begins by summarizing two of the central themes in the opening chapters of Mark’s Gospel: the excitement that Jesus’ healings and exorcisms aroused among the general populace; and Jesus’ call for certain people to become a part of his inner circle of followers. We have already considered these themes in previous sermons in this series, and we will have occasion to do so again as we continue our study of Mark. For this reason, for the bulk of our time today, I want to focus on the theme in the other half of this passage: the mounting opposition towards Jesus, and especially what we learn from his response to the charge that the scribes leveled against him in verse 22.

But before we turn to that, I do want to mention a couple of things in relation to what Mark records about the appointment of the twelve apostles. First of all, it was certainly no accident that Jesus chose twelve disciples. As you know, there were twelve tribes in Israel, corresponding to the twelve sons of Jacob. By calling twelve men to be in his inner circle of followers, Jesus was making a statement about his identity and about what he had come to do. It shows Jesus to be none other than the God of Israel, the same God who made his glorious presence dwell in the midst of the twelve tribes. Furthermore, it shows that this God had come into the world as a man in order to re-gather his covenant people around himself. The fact that Jesus called twelve disciples identifies the church as the true Israel, the end-time people of God. We see this even more clearly in other

passages in the Gospels, most notably Matthew 19:28, where Jesus spoke these words to the twelve: “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” Jesus says that the twelve apostles will govern the twelve tribes, indicating that the church and the believing Israelites from the Old Testament are one people of God, not two distinct peoples.

Mark says that Jesus called the twelve in order that they might be “with him and that he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.” That is a good definition of apostleship. Jesus called the apostles to be with him during the period of his earthly ministry so that they could be the authorized eyewitnesses through whom he would continue his ministry after he returned to heaven. The apostles’ authority to give the foundational testimony upon which the church would be built was derived from the fact that Jesus called them for that very purpose.

One other thing that I want to point out about this list of the twelve apostles is the last name on the list: Judas Iscariot, who would later betray Jesus by handing him over to be crucified. As Jesus began to face increasing opposition, here we see that this opposition even extended into the band of followers who were closest to him.

The mention of Judas introduces the theme that dominates the remainder of the passage: the theme of opposition to Jesus. It is a theme that has been building over the first few chapters of the Gospel, and it will continue to build until it reaches its climax in the crucifixion. In this passage, Mark shows us that some of the opposition that Jesus faced was from those who were very close to him: not only from Judas, but from his own family members. We do not know precisely which family members Mark is talking about, because it is not specified. We do know that Jesus' mother, Mary, was still alive at this time. And from Matthew's Gospel we learn that Mary had four other sons - James, Joseph, Simon and Judas - as well as several daughters (13:55-56). Whether or not all of them are included here is impossible to say, but Mark's language gives the impression that this was the general attitude of Jesus' family members at this point in time. They looked at the swarming crowds and concluded that this man whom they thought they knew so well had lost his mind.

But their opposition to Jesus only serves to introduce something much more serious. The excitement that was swelling around Jesus, paired with the controversy over his attitude towards the Sabbath, resulted in the sending of a delegation of scribes, or experts in the law, from Jerusalem. And, as the text indicates, these men had not come to conduct an investigation. They were there to try to quench the enthusiasm surrounding Jesus. They had already made up their minds. We all know how this sort of thing can happen. When we set our minds against someone, there is a sense in which that person cannot do

anything right, at least as far as we are concerned. That is what was happening with these scribes. They didn't care about the good things that Jesus had done, the healing and liberation that he had brought about in so many people's lives. They only knew that he was upsetting the status quo, and they were not about to stand for it. So they accused him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons. As Jesus put it, they said that he was casting out Satan by the power of Satan. They were charging him with using occult powers to accomplish his mighty acts. By the way, this argument was also used in many of the rabbinic writings produced in the centuries after Jesus' lifetime. The rabbis made such charges because they had to: there was no denying the fact that this Jesus had done a number of amazing things, things which no one had ever seen before. The rabbis had to find a way to explain these things. So they called Jesus a sorcerer.

As we reflect upon Jesus' response to this accusation, we gain a great deal of insight into the nature of the demonic realm. After exposing the absurdity of the scribes' charge, Jesus says that the exorcisms that he was performing signified that Satan's kingdom was coming to an end. The first thing to notice here is that Jesus says that Satan has a kingdom. The world is Satan's kingdom. There are a number of places where the Bible describes Satan as the prince, or the ruler, of this world. Of course, Satan is really a usurper, claiming dominion over a realm that is not rightfully his own. Nevertheless, he

cruelly lords himself over the people of this world, and he strives to bring as many to hell with him as he can.

Jesus also tells us that Satan is a powerful ruler. He is the “strong man.” As Luther wrote,

*For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and pow’r are great; and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.*

We can see the results of Satan’s tyrannical power in the world today. How often do we look at the news headlines and learn of some senseless, heartless, malevolent act that defies rational explanation? When we see such things, we realize that there are sinister spiritual forces at work in this world. But the Bible says that Satan’s influence is far more extensive than what we see in such extreme examples of human wickedness. As we read in 1 John 5:19, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”

This brings us to the next part of Jesus’ response to the scribes. He says that he has come into the world to bind Satan and plunder him of his possessions. But what does this mean? Satan is still at work in our world. In what sense has he been bound? We can think of Satan’s binding in terms of an analogy that was made famous by a Swiss

Reformed theologian named Oscar Cullmann shortly after the end of World War II.

Cullmann likened Satan's situation after the coming of Christ to that of Germany after D-Day. D-Day was the turning point that made Germany's downfall certain, but the Nazis kept fighting and inflicting casualties for another year. Likewise, even though Satan's doom is certain, he keeps trying to inflict as much damage as he can. Yes, Satan is still very much at work in our world, but his D-Day has come. Jesus' coming into the world was an all-out assault upon Satan's dominion, and it was the fatal blow.

It is important for us to understand the implications that this has for us. Those of us who are united to Christ by faith share in his victory over Satan. While it is true that Satan still tempts us, it is also true that he holds no true power over us. Jesus has delivered us from the domain of darkness and brought us into his kingdom (see Col. 1:13). As Paul wrote at the conclusion of his letter to the Romans, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet." (Romans 16:20) And as James writes, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7) We find a helpful reflection on this idea in C.S. Lewis' classic book *The Screwtape Letters*, where the demon Screwtape rebukes his nephew Wormwood for his failure in tempting a certain young man. Screwtape writes:

"I note with great displeasure that the Enemy [God - remember, this is a demon talking] has, for the time being, put a forcible end to your direct attacks on the patient's chastity. You ought to have known that He always

does in the end, and you ought to have stopped before you reached that stage. For as things are, your man has now discovered the dangerous truth that these attacks don't last forever; consequently you cannot use again what is, after all, our best weapon - the belief of ignorant humans, that there is no hope of getting rid of us except by yielding." [105]

Have you ever thought about this? The temptations that plague you are resistible - not, of course, by relying upon your own strength, but by looking to Christ in faith and believing him when he says that Satan will flee from you when you resist him. As 1 John 5:18 puts it, Jesus "protects [the one who has been born of God], and the evil one does not touch him." Do you struggle with a besetting sin? Then you must lay hold of what the Bible teaches here. Giving in to temptation is not inevitable for the believer in Jesus Christ. You can resist. God has promised that he will not let Satan have you. Believe him on this, and you will find that he proves true to his Word. Jesus has bound the strong man. He is mightier than Satan, and he will save you from his snares, if you trust him to do so.

This is why Jesus responded to the scribes' accusation with such a stern warning. He came to do men good, to set them free from Satan's cruel tyranny; yet the scribes called him a worker of evil. They were in danger of blaspheming the Holy Spirit because they charged Jesus, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, with being possessed by a demon. It is the equivalent of calling God the devil. Jesus accomplished his mighty works by the

power of the Holy Spirit, but the scribes were assigning the action of God to a demonic origin.

This is the unforgivable sin: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is a sin committed by those who have seen something of the power and truth of God, but defiantly reject it. As Calvin writes,

“[H]ow great is the blindness of the human mind, in forming such
perverse judgments about the glory of God when openly displayed...
[W]hat a monstrous crime it is, not only to profane intentionally the sacred
name of God, but to spit in his face when he shines evidently before us.”

The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a defiant rejection of God’s revelation by someone who ought to know better. Thomas Boston defines this sin as follows:

“It is a rejecting, opposing, and blaspheming, of Christ and the way of
salvation through him, after a man hath been clearly convinced of the
truth, and tasted the goodness thereof, by the inward operation of the Holy
Ghost, and that deliberately, and willfully, and avowedly, out of malice
and despite against Christ and his Holy Spirit.” [*Works*, vol. 11, 535]

Boston is saying that this is a sin committed by someone within the church; someone who professes to be a Christian (or, in the case of these scribes, someone who is a member of God's covenant people). It is a sin committed by someone who, in some mysterious sense, has been enlightened by the Spirit, though not in a truly saving manner. This is why the writer of Hebrews describes a person who commits this sin as one who "shared in the Holy Spirit." (Hebrews 6:4) It is a sin committed by someone who really and truly seemed to be a believer in Jesus Christ.

This reminds us that the most grievous sins are those that are committed by people inside the covenant community. It is a striking thought. The worst sins are not those committed by pagans, but by people within our own ranks. This is true because we have had the benefit of much more revelation than those who stand outside the church. And when that revelation is rejected, or defied, or neglected, or ignored, it is a grievous sin indeed. We see this throughout the pages of Scripture. Jesus said to the people of Capernaum, "For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." (Mt. 11:23-24) Remember, the people of Capernaum were Jews, and we have no reason to believe that they were committing the kinds of atrocities that were being done in the city of Sodom prior to its destruction. But it will be worse for the people of Capernaum than for the people of Sodom on the day of judgment because

Capernaum had rejected what God had revealed to them in Christ, and they should have known better.

Now it is important to say, especially to those who have a particularly tender conscience, that we can take comfort in knowing that this is a sin from which it is impossible to repent, as it says in Hebrews 6:4. If you are afraid that you might have committed this sin, then the very fact that you are concerned about this is a sign that you have not committed the unforgivable sin. Jesus is not talking about saying a careless word or straying from God's commandments and then feeling guilty about it later. He is talking about a fixed attitude from which there is no turning back. He is talking about trampling the Son of God underfoot.

We should not live a guilt-plagued life in which we worry about whether we might have committed the unforgivable sin. However, we must take heed of the dreadful warning that is sounded in this passage. We have every reason to believe that there are people in the world today, perhaps even some of the people with whom we rub shoulders in our day-to-day lives, who have committed this eternal sin. These are people upon whom, in effect, God has already pronounced his final word of judgment. For them, it is too late. Their eternal destiny is sealed. They walk through this life as those who are already damned. It is a chilling thought, a thought that should have a sobering effect upon us. It serves as a terrible warning against neglecting the great salvation that has been unveiled

to us in the gospel, a warning against trifling with sin and worldliness, a warning against foolishly thinking that we can wait until later to get our spiritual affairs in order. The very fact that there is such a thing as an unforgivable sin should make us exceedingly vigilant, causing us to keep close watch against the deceitfulness of sin.

Rise, my soul to watch and pray, from thy sleep awaken;

be not by the evil day, unawares o'ertaken.

For the foe, well we know, oft his harvest reapeth while the Christian sleepeth.

[“Rise, My Soul, to Watch and Pray”]