

November 24, 2013
Sermon notes/Follow up
Jesus, the Spirit, and the Unpardonable Sin
Mark 3:22-30
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In the sermon I sought to introduce how parables work. Parables are sometimes treated as brilliant homiletical devices. Jesus is the master communicator who knew how to punctuate his sermons with homey, clever illustrations that connected with the common people.

But parables really aren't illustrations. They are more like mysteries or riddles. They harden outsiders, who miss the meanings of the parables, and thus serve as instruments of judgment. But they make insiders wise, revealing to them the secrets of the kingdom. Parables take wisdom to understand, and in understanding them wisdom is increased. The secrets hidden in parables are only cracked open by faith.

Over the last couple weeks, we have looked at both the surface level meaning as well as the deeper meaning of the parable found in Mark 3:23ff. On the surface, the parable is about spiritual warfare. Jesus is not fighting *for* Satan, as the scribes accuse. That would make no sense since it would mean Satan is undermining his own kingdom and dividing his own house. Rather, Jesus is fighting *against* Satan. Yes, Satan's house will come to an end, but it will come to an end not because Jesus is on Satan's side but because Jesus has bound the "strong man" and is now plundering his house. Jesus began to bind Satan when he resisted his temptations in the wilderness. The overarching effect of Satan's binding is that he will no longer be able to deceive and blind the nations as the gospel goes out (cf. Rev. 20). Ultimately Satan will be crushed under the feet of Jesus and his disciples (Rom. 16).

But there is a deeper meaning, a more hidden meaning in this parable. Once we see it, we realize that this parable really summarizes the whole of Mark's gospel. What is that deeper meaning?

Note that after meeting Satan in the wilderness, Jesus meets Satanic forces (an unclean spirit) in the synagogue. This is a sign of Israel's covenantal condition. The synagogues need to be exorcised. The synagogues – Israel's houses of worship – have come under Satanic sway. The influence of Satan over Israel is seen especially in her leadership, the scribes and the Pharisees. There are several clues that the house/kingdom of Satan in the parable is really, in some sense, the house/kingdom of old covenant Israel. In other words, Israel has broken covenant and is ripe for judgment. She has failed to be a holy nation and has instead sided with unclean spirits. What are the clues that point us towards this connection?

I provided some clues in the sermon, e.g., the murderous intention of the Pharisees (Satan was a murderer from the beginning), the blasphemous lies of the scribes

(Satan is the father of lies), and the false accusation of the scribes (“Satan” means accuser). In the sermon, I did not get to deal with the clue provided by the healing miracles of Jesus, which is a major piece of evidence. The healing miracles Jesus does in Mark’s gospel show that Israel is in the grip of idolatry. These false gods are really demons (cf. Psalm 96:5 LXX calls the gods, or idols, of the nations “demons”).

The healings Jesus does in Mark fall into certain categories and patterns. They are not “random acts of kindness” but serve a very specific purpose. The kinds of ailments Jesus treats are significant. Consider:

- In the gospel, twice we find Jesus healing a deaf-mute – someone who has ears and a mouth but cannot hear or speak.
- In this gospel, twice he heals a blind man – someone who has eyes but cannot see
- In this gospel, he heals a man with a withered hand and a man with lame legs – a man who has hands, but cannot handle, a man with feet, but cannot walk

Now, what is Jesus doing? First a caveat: It would be entirely wrong to assume that anyone suffering from these sorts of maladies is suffering because of a specific sin or idolatry in his life. Scripture shows us that God’s providence is more complicated than that. There is not a one-to-one connection between sin and suffering. Often times, our suffering has no connection at all to any particular sin we’ve committed. Indeed, sometimes we are suffering precisely because we have been righteous. Think of the case of Job, a man who was righteous and yet suffered greatly. Jesus corrected his disciples in John 9, explaining the man born blind was not born in that condition because of his sin or his parents’ sin. The apostle Paul suffered from a thorn in the flesh, but his pain was not due to any sin on his part. So do not misunderstand the point being made here from the gospel Mark: *I am not saying anyone who suffers in any of these ways is suffering because of some sin in their life. It would be cruel and unbiblical to suggest that.*

But at the same time, we do know that sin has effects, and sometimes sin brings suffering in this life. In the case of the people who are healed in Mark’s gospel, there is good reason to think that their physical problems are the effects of personal and/or national idolatry. We find many of these sick or disabled people mingled in the crowds or synagogues with the demon possessed. They’re all lumped together. Yes, some of these who are suffering show great faith, and that faith is instrumental in their healing. But they are part of a nation that has sunk into idolatry, and that idolatry has corporate, covenantal consequences. Within the horizon of Mark’s gospel, there are good reasons to connect the particular ailments Jesus heals with the nation’s slide into apostasy. In particular, Psalm 115 connects these maladies with idolatry. Consider a portion of this Psalm [with my annotations]:

³ But our God *is* in heaven;

He does whatever He pleases.

⁴ Their idols *are* silver and gold,

The work of men’s hands.

⁵ They have mouths, but they do not speak; [idols are mute]
Eyes they have, but they do not see; [idols are blind]
⁶ They have ears, but they do not hear; [idols are deaf]
Noses they have, but they do not smell;
⁷ They have hands, but they do not handle; [idols have withered hands]
Feet they have, but they do not walk; [idols have lame feet]
Nor do they mutter through their throat. [idols are mute]
⁸ Those who make them are like them; [muteness, blindness, deafness, etc.
may be the result of worship mute, blind, deaf, etc. gods]
*So is everyone who trusts in them. [the principle: you become like what you
worship*

If those who worship idols become like them, and we find in Israel idol-like muteness, deafness, blindness, etc., it means Israel is plagued with idolatry. Israel is becoming like the gods (= demons) she has been worshipping. Psalm 115 provides a framework for understanding what Jesus is doing in his healing miracles. Why, in Mark's gospel, are there so many in Israel who are blind, deaf, mute, etc.? The same reason there are so many who are demon possessed. The problem is that Israel is in league with false gods, and is becoming like those false gods. Her sin has de-humanized her; Jesus came to re-humanize Israel. He came to rescue Israel from her Satanic idolatry and all its effects.

Sure, it looks like Israel is worshipping God. But it did in Ezekiel's day as well, when the prophet was given insight into the real Spiritual idolatry going on in the temple (cf. Ezek. 8-10). Israel is not worshipping God, despite appearances; Israel is worshipping idols, and behind those idols are demonic powers. In some deep sense, the house of Israel in that day had become the house of Satan, by and large. Jesus came to rescue people from Satan's house and from the disastrous effects of satanic idolatry. He came to heal, to restore, and to liberate.

Again, this does not mean first century Israelites were openly worshipping Satan, or openly committing idolatry (e.g., there were no statues or icons in first century Israel). But the truth is that idolatry often does not look like idolatry. It often poses as something else. In the case of first century Israel, idolatry was masquerading in things like the hyper-sabbatarianism of the Pharisees, the extreme nationalism/patriotism of the zealots, and the political pragmatism of the Sadducees. In our day, idolatry can manifest itself as misguided religious zeal just as much as irreligious hedonism and humanism. It can show up in an obsession with the self, and the self's stuff (e.g., consumerism), but also in an obsession with causes or movements outside the self (e.g., a political party or cultural trend). It can manifest itself in misplaced trust, e.g., placing one's hope in science or technology or medicine or exercise or diet or relationships. Or it can show up in any of the various "-isms" that can become dominant worldviews and ways of life, e.g., racism, statism, nationalism, familism, entertainmentism, working-for-the-weekendism, etc. It can show up in disordered loves and false worship, such as a fixation on power, money, or religious or cultural status. It shows up in addictions of various sorts. These are

the principalities and powers we must contend with, both inside and outside the church. Idolatry is sometimes blatant, as in Islam or Hinduism. But it can also be sophisticated and subtle, even using the trappings of the true religion.

Returning to the parable, the point here is that Israel had come under Satanic influence, especially her leadership. I am obviously not claiming that each and every Israelite was apostate; we know from the gospel accounts that there were many faithful covenant members in Israel in Jesus' day. Nor am I saying that each person who suffered one of the these ailments listed in Psalm 115 was an idolater; the gospel accounts themselves show that isn't true. What I am saying is that there is plenty of evidence that, corporately considered, Israel as a whole had become aligned with the house and kingdom of Satan. In the parable, the references to Satan's house and kingdom can certainly be taken in a generic way to refer to any and all forms of genuine spiritual warfare, e.g., Jesus rescues all sorts of unbelievers who have been unwittingly on Satan's side in the great battle of history, and he's still doing it today. But the parable is especially and more specifically about Israel, and Israel's need to be rescued from Satan's power. As I said in the sermon, the Satanic grip on Israel is seen especially in the murderous intentions, lies, and accusations of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus came to divide Israel (= Satan's house) by claiming and rescuing a portion of Israel for himself, and making them his disciples. When Israel is divided into those who follow Jesus and those who reject him, it is sure to fall. Judgment on unbelieving, apostate Israel came to pass in 70 AD, after the Israelites had rejected not only the ministry of the Son during his earthly sojourn, but also the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church.

An addendum: You may be wondering about Psalm 115's reference to idols having noses but not being able to smell. How is that defect reproduced in idolatrous Israel? The best I can come up with is Peter's mother-in-law who had a fever in Mark 1. If her fever was like fevers we are familiar with, it may have had respiratory (and therefore olfactory) ramifications.

A second addendum: The fact that it was especially Israel's leadership that had fallen into the grip of Satan is seen in the use of the term "goods" in Mark 3:27. This word is used to describe the vessels of the temple in Mark 11:16, the only other time it shows up in the gospel. Linking these two texts, the house of the temple has become the house of Satan. But Jesus has bound the strong man so he can plunder his goods to build a new temple.