

4-15-2018

Under the Power and Control

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Recommended Citation

Heaton, Chris (2018) "Under the Power and Control," *Grapho : Concordia Seminary Student Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/grapho/vol1/iss1/8>

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Under the Power and Control

Chris Heaton

Liturgical Setting

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Series B

Text

Mark 3:22–30

Structure

Verse-by-Verse

Focus

Jesus has power over the spiritual realm of Satan, who is bound first through Jesus's ministry and ultimately through his death and resurrection.

Function

That my hearers may endure spiritual testing with full confidence of the victory won over Satan by Jesus, under whose power they are now under in baptism.

Introduction

Context and Set-up

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you, from God our Father through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is Mark 3:22–30. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus's family thinks he's crazy.

This is the claim of the verse which precedes our text, verse 21. "He's out of his mind." Upon hearing of the things that Jesus was doing and saying, his family goes out to seize him. But they weren't the only ones who failed to see who Jesus is. Mark portrays Jesus very strangely at times. Misassessments are common in Mark's Gospel.

Jesus also meets rejection. Both his ministry and his person. Already at the beginning of chapter three the Pharisees went out *with their rivals* the Herodians and held counsel with regards to how they should destroy him. Jesus had developed a following—crowds pressed upon him at every turn. This could pose a political threat. He had also "developed" enemies, largely due to his ministry—forgiving of sins, his touching unclean lepers, "working" on the Sabbath, and casting out demons. Doing "God stuff." There are many who misunderstand him, misidentify him, and those

who seek his destruction.

This is the context for our reading, starting at verse 22.

Verse 22

And the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem, were saying, "He has Beelzebul" and "In the power of the ruler of the demons, he is throwing out demons."¹

Jesus is met by scribes from Jerusalem. Scribes were allies with Pharisees—both conservative groups—and both were troubled with Jesus's activities. He had met members of this group (scribes) before—when he healed the paralytic and forgiven his sins in chapter two. Now a *particular* group of scribes comes and makes a charge: he **has** Beelzebul.

Who is Beelzebul? We aren't sure of the referent; scholars have different opinions. From the second charge though, we can discern that Beelzebul is *seen as the leader of the demons*. In other words, **this is a synonym for Satan**. Jesus makes this very connection in verse 23. But they aren't just him calling names. *The scribes connect the ministry of Jesus to the work of Satan*. The healings, the giving of forgiveness, the working on the Sabbath, the casting out of demons are seen by them not as God's work...but Satan's.

In contemporary culture, to make gross miscorrelations against an opponent is common place. It is actually considered to be an art form. Scolding "hot takes" on Twitter. Facebook rants by "keyboard gangsters." However, the scribes aren't just doing art. Throwing out accusations to see what sticks in order to get likes and retweets. They are making the claim that Jesus is under the power and sphere of control of Satan.

**He is a roaring lion
who prowls and seeks
to devour.**

This is the way Jesus understands the charge. Now, on one hand, they have some evidence. The demons seem to know who he is. And...he does possess authority over them. But Jesus also forgives sins. He

cleanses lepers—doing things *only God alone can do*. They do correctly discern a truth: *his activity is a physical manifestation of the spiritual realm*. They just attribute his ministry to the wrong realm! And Jesus calls them on it.

Verses 23–27²

And summoning them, he began speaking to them in parables:

"How is Satan actually able to throw out Satan? And if a kingdom divides against itself, that kingdom is not able to stand. And if a house divides against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan...has risen against himself and has divided, he is not able to stand, but has an end. On the other hand, no one is able, upon going into the house of the strong man, to thoroughly plunder his stuff, if not first he binds the strong man—and

then his house he will thoroughly plunder.”

Jesus, we are told, speaks “in parables.” Parables here refer to **both** the three sayings **as well as** the short metaphor. Both are introduced with a rhetorical question: **how is this accusation possible?** How am I able to throw out Satan if I am under the power of Satan? Jesus then answers with three assertions. *The first is always true: If a kingdom divides itself, it cannot stand.* Anyone hearing would likely agree with this. Similarly, *the second one is also true...with a future application...that house will not be able to stand.* But then Jesus moves to a *particular* case, the very thing they are charging Jesus with! If Satan has risen up against himself, he is not able to stand. *He has an end.*

Jesus then tells another parable—the binding of the strong man and the plundering of his goods. This parable also represents a general truth: *Jesus’s ministry is spiritual warfare.* Far from being under control of Satan, Jesus Christ, having had the Holy Spirit descend *into* him at his baptism, and subsequently being ejected into the wilderness to endure and overcome temptation by Satan, this Jesus Christ, the Son of God is **under the power, not of Satan, but of the Holy Spirit.** Now, in his ministry, this Spirit-possessed Jesus comes to neutralize the spiritual powers arrayed against him and his people. In his commentary on Mark, James Voelz points out: *this neutralization is the saving act accomplished in the ministry of Jesus.*³

This has a greater fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus will bind Satan by going to the cross and dying on behalf of those afflicted by the powers of darkness. His resurrection is the ultimate defeat of Satan. Death itself, the physical manifestation of the fall, of sin and the power of the devil, is defeated once and for all. God’s people are no longer to be under the power of Satan. He has been bound; he is neutralized.

You might be saying, “Yeah, but there’s still sin; there’s still spiritual warfare. Was this binding ineffectual? Temporary?”

No. The binding of Satan, first in the ministry of Jesus, then in his death and resurrection is instantiated **in a new age.** But Satan, while now bound, still has some sway until the return of Christ, that is, the full consummation of this age. We still live with our sinful flesh. And this combination—the sway of Satan and our sin—inflicts damage.

Satan still has a voice. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the Ring of Power has been destroyed, and things are put to right. A new age has dawned. Yet there still is a malevolent force that wanders Middle Earth: Saruman. Formerly a wizard of great power, he has been bound, defeated. But he still has his voice. Through this voice, he can tempt, cajole, and even cow people into doing his bidding. No, he can’t kill or destroy, **but he can do damage.**

Satan, though bound, still has a voice. He is a roaring lion who prowls and seeks to devour. But those under the power and control of Jesus have nothing to fear.

Satan can't kill, he can't harm. But he can tempt, cajole, persuade. Sometimes this is seen in our lives *when we give voice* to the Satanic thoughts or impulses in our minds. Our complaints against others. Our gossip. Our tweets. Acting on lustful thoughts. **Soon what was just an inner voice turns into a full-blown physical manifestation.** All starting with a mere suggestion. This gives the devil's voice a form, gives him a power he doesn't really have. And this is sin. For us as believers, sin is still a present reality. But Christ is victor over sin. Sin can and will be forgiven. We see this claim in the final section of our text.

Verses 28–30

“Truly I say to you: all the sins will be forgiven to the sons of man... and the blasphemies... as much as they blaspheme. But whoever blasphemes with reference to the Holy Spirit, he is not gonna have forgiveness into eternity, but he is guilty of an eternal sin.” (He said this) because they were saying, “He has an unclean demon.”

The first question: what does it mean to “blaspheme”? And, secondly: why is there a distinction between blaspheming generally and blaspheming the Holy Spirit?

To blaspheme is to speak in way that maligns and denigrates. In the context of Mark, to blaspheme is to speak in such a manner against God, against his Son. And there are many who blaspheme in their misunderstanding of who Jesus is (remember Jesus's family who thinks he is crazy?!). *But Jesus says that they can and will be forgiven.* There are many who don't see the identity of Jesus. Who don't believe. Jesus as victor restores proper relationships to him. In contrition, repentance and faith, the Spirit leads them to sight. He forgives their blasphemy. We see this in Acts 1 where Jesus's mother and brothers are restored and are in the upper room with the disciples.

But the second statement is spoken to the scribes—and any who assert that Jesus is in league with Satan. *To claim that the Holy Spirit's work is actually the work of Satan is a damnable lie.* But it is the kind of lie that Satan wants told, that believers might despair. In other words, to ultimately reject the work of the Spirit and believe that Christ's victory on the cross wasn't enough. And that will not be forgiven.

I started having nightmares when I began seminary. They were the worst in that first quarter. They were dreams of my sinful past, recalling in vivid detail the things I had done. These dreams would wake me. And I couldn't go back to sleep. Sometimes they were dreams of what I as a depraved sinner *hypothetically might do.* I had a dream once that I murdered my family. I can still remember that dream and waking up in terror. It seemed so real.

And the thread through them all was *the whisper of Satan's voice:* so, you want to be a pastor? “You—with your past, with your sin, you want to be a shepherd of God's sheep? I know what you've done! I know what you are capable of! You are a fraud. And he doesn't really forgive you.” The goal of Satan's voice was for me to

reject the work of the Spirit.

After several weeks I reached out to my pastor. I will never forget what he said. Tersely, “Tell Satan to go to hell. You are baptized! He has no claim over you!” *In my baptism, in our baptism, we are under the power and control of Jesus Christ. We are Spirit possessed.* We are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. We are joined with the victory that binds Satan. The death and resurrection of Jesus gives us forgiveness and everlasting life. Maybe dreams aren’t what afflict you...maybe it’s something else...but you need not fear. Satan is bound by Jesus. He cannot harm you anymore.

In this new age that has dawned, in his defeat, Satan wants to convince you he has you under his control. But he doesn’t. He doesn’t have the power. He just has a voice. This voice will forever be silenced at the reappearing of Christ. Until then, his voice has no claim on you. You may utter outrageous things, demeaning things...but in repentance and faith, you stand forgiven **in Christ**. To be “in Christ” is the end of Satan. It is the negation of the claim made by the scribes, that the work of Jesus is governed by the ruler of the demons. To be **in Christ** is to be under his power and control. And when Satan, with his fell voice afflicts you, in the tradition of Martin Luther, who knew something about spiritual warfare, we say to the devil, “Go to hell. I am baptized! You have no claim over me.” And we go to sleep.

In the Holy name of Jesus. Amen.

SDG

Endnotes

¹ The translation given in italics throughout the sermon is my own.

² This section is greatly indebted to and drawn from: James Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 252–263.

³ Ibid.