

The Stronger Man

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[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you enabled Mark to remember this incident and to remember the words Jesus spoke in that context. Now we pray that you would help us understand these words and more than understand, will you help us live in light of what these words tell us.

This we pray in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen. What do you make of the text Tara just read for us?

When you see and hear these words, what do you think? What do you feel? We say of First Baptist Church, we are a community following Jesus with a heart for the city and beyond.

A community following Jesus. Okay. Who is he? Who is this Jesus?

As we have been discovering throughout this series, the more important form of the question is, who does Jesus think he is? The strong man, he answers.

[1 : 20] Or more accurately, the stronger man. The person in our midst is the stronger man who comes to invade a strong man's house.

And once he invades the house, he binds the strong man, takes away the weapons on which he's been relying, and then begins to plunder the strong man's house.

What is Jesus talking about in this text? According to Mark, one of the four gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, according to Mark, no sooner had Jesus come on the scene when really weird things started to happen.

Really good things started to happen, like people being healed of diseases, lepers being cleansed, people without sight being able to see again. But weird things also began to happen.

Jesus would simply show up, and demonic spirits would yell, I know who you are, the Holy One of God. Jesus would simply walk into a space, a synagogue, for instance, before speaking a word, before doing anything, unclean spirits, as Mark called them, would cry out, What do we have to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth?

[2 : 42] Have you come to destroy us? On nearly every page of the first half of the gospel of Mark, we find Jesus encountering what Mark calls unclean spirits, agents of the evil one himself.

I have to confess to you that I would just assume skip over texts like this in the gospel. But I cannot. For one thing, there are too many of them.

And to skip over these texts is to skip over a major part of the gospel's portrait of Jesus. But for another reason, we cannot skip over them because it turns out that Jesus' encounter with evil in the form of unclean spirits is fundamental to the gospel's portrait of Jesus.

The gospel writers, especially Mark, would tell us that we will never understand who Jesus is apart from his encounter with the demonic.

Just as we'll never understand who Jesus is apart from the one he calls Father whom he loves and trusts, so we will never understand who Jesus is apart from his engagement and power over the one he calls Satan.

[4 : 09] So what are we, 21st century people living in a sophisticated, world-class city like Vancouver, to make of Mark 3 and other texts like it?

You might know that first century readers of Mark would not have been surprised that weird things started happening around Jesus.

The whole ancient world believed in demons and devils. They would have had no trouble singing Martin Luther's hymn, This world with devils filled threatens to undo us.

The great German historian Adolf Harnack, speaking of the first century understanding of reality, tells us, the whole world and the circumambient atmosphere were filled with devils, not merely idolatry, but every phase and form of life was ruled by them.

They sat on thrones, they hovered around candles, the earth was literally a hell. First century people lived in the fear of the demonic.

[5 : 15] So a first century reader of Mark sees these weird things happening and is not surprised. They are surprised, though, about how it's different. Jesus does something different in these contexts, which we'll see in a moment.

But how are we secularized people, although I wonder how secular we really are given the amount of money spent on Halloween, how are we to process the stories of Jesus and the demonic? Seems to me there are three options. The first option is to say such events did not really take place. To say that Mark has drawn his picture of Jesus in terms the people of his time would appreciate. Since people of that day feared the demonic, and since Mark knows Jesus wants to set people free from fear, Mark and the other writers of the gospel create these stories, hoping thereby to comfort troubled souls.

The second option is to say that these stories of demons and demon activity are but primitive ways of describing broken reality. We, in our day, this option would say no better.

[6 : 34] We now know that the phenomena first century people attributed to the demonic can now be explained by natural causes, physical, chemical, psychological, neurological factors.

This option would argue that Jesus wishing to meet people on their own terms accommodated himself to their understanding of reality. If people believed that some of their illness and some of disorders were caused by demonic spirits, then Jesus would work on that level of their belief. And instead of trying to change their basic belief system, their worldview, Jesus simply entered it. But this option would say Jesus himself did not really hold to this view of reality.

The third option is to take the New Testament stories on face value. To say that Mark and the other gospel writers are describing what actually happened.

This third option says that although they cannot be described with any scientific precision, there really are spiritual enemies like unclean spirits. Such spiritual beings are, in the words of New Testament scholar James Dunn, particular manifestations of evil in the world that is hostile to God.

[7 : 53] This option says that there really is in the universe a spiritual force, a personal spiritual force hostile to God. And just as the living God has spiritual beings called angels to do his bidding, so the enemy of God has spiritual beings to do his bidding.

This third option would say that Jesus never accommodated himself to anything he regarded as superstitious. Jesus never hesitated to correct what he regarded as erroneous thinking.

This third option would say that Jesus acknowledges that evil spirits exist, that they can and do gain a measure of control in human life, that they can cause all kinds of disorder and destruction.

This third option would say that Jesus comes with the express purpose of defeating the works of the devil. Now, I submit to you that this third option is the option that makes best sense of the data before us.

And I realize that in taking this interpretation, I'm open to the charge of being an extreme literalist or even a fool. I realize in taking this interpretation that this raises then a number of other really good questions.

[9 : 13] Questions like how does the idea of the demonic square with the insights of modern physics and psychology? How do demons still operate in the world? And if they do, how can we discern when they're working?

And if they're working, what are we to do? C.S. Lewis helps us here as he often does. In his great work, *Mere Christianity*, he makes the observation that the devil sends errors into the world in pairs. He sends errors into the world in pairs, in pairs of opposites, Lewis writes, and he always encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking which is worse. You see why, of course, he relies on your extra dislike of one error to draw you gradually into the opposite error.

Now, regarding the demonic, the two pairs of error are, on the one hand, becoming so interested in the demonic dimension that we think we see a demon under every bush, or the other hand, ignoring and discounting this dimension of reality altogether.

Canadian psychologist John White, in his book, *The Fight*, puts it so well. He writes, the devil welcomes a hume or a faust with equal zest. He is equally delighted by an atheist, a liberal theologian, or a witch.

[10 : 42] And it may be added, he feels as happy with a Christian mind preoccupied with demons all day long as he is with a Christian mind that never gives them a thought. Texts like Mark 3 force

upon us the whole matter of worldview.

Texts like Mark 3 make us evaluate again our vision of reality. James Sire, who for many years was the editor of InterVarsity Press, defines worldview as a set of presuppositions or assumptions which we hold consciously or subconsciously about the makeup of the world.

I'll say that again. A worldview, a vision of reality, is a set of presuppositions or assumptions which we hold consciously or subconsciously about the makeup of the world.

Now, whether or not one can articulate those presuppositions and assumptions is not the point. The point is every individual and every culture has these assumptions about how the world works.

N.T. Wright calls worldview the lenses through which a people or a society looks out at life. the grid upon which are plotted the multiple experiences of life.

[12:04] Now, if I'm reading the situation correctly, the worldview that dominates our city and most cities of the world is one we could call the secular worldview.

The secular worldview is essentially two-dimensional. The human self and the physical universe. It is thought that everything can be understood and explained by these two dimensions, the human self and the physical universe.

Everything that happens on this view has its cause in one or both of these two dimensions, in the human self or the physical universe. But the biblical worldview is four-dimensional.

There are the two easily recognized dimensions, the human self and the physical universe, but there are also the living God and unseen created spiritual beings and forces.

And the Bible would tell us that everything has to be understood, explained, accounted for multi-dimensionally. The biblical authors would tell us that we are not being realistic about life unless and until we factor in all four dimensions of reality.

[13:21] The biblical authors would tell us, us secularized people, that for all of our hard-nosed realism, we are not being realistic enough. When trying to understand what is happening in our lives, in our cities, in the world, we have to take into account the dimension of the human person, the dimension of the physical universe, and the dimension of the living God, and this dimension of unseen created spiritual beings and forces.

Again, C.S. Lewis helps us. This time in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, he writes, it seems to me, this four-dimensional view of the world, it seems to me to explain a good many facts.

It agrees with the plain sense of scripture, the tradition of Christendom, the belief of most people at most time, and it conflicts with nothing that any of the sciences has shown to be true.

So what are we to make of texts like Mark 3? We are to take them at face value and let them challenge and refine our worldview so that we live more realistically.

Now, the important question is what does Jesus make of all that started to happen when he showed up? Which brings us to his first parable, the parable recorded in Mark 3.

[14:50] Mark tells us that Jesus' own, apparently his close relatives, Jesus' own were concerned about him. Having heard reports about what was going on around Jesus, they concluded that he was going mad, that he was losing his senses.

Mark tells us that the professional theologian, the scribes of the Pharisees, were also concerned about Jesus. He's possessed by Beelzebub, they say. He cast out demons by the ruler of the demons.

The scribes had no trouble with the fact that Jesus was doing exorcism. What they were concerned about was the source of Jesus' power and they concluded that Jesus was actually in cahoots with Satan himself.

Jesus points out the logical inconsistency of that, saying, how can Satan stand against Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.

If Satan has risen up against himself, he is divided and cannot stand but is finished. And then Jesus warns the scribes to be very careful of how they analyze Jesus' deeds.

[15:56] To attribute the work of Jesus to the work of evil could put them in danger of committing the unpardonable sin. Then Jesus gives us his own analysis of what is going on in his first parable.

It's in Mark chapter 3, verse 27. Mark 3, 27. But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man then he will plunder his property.

Luke gives us actually a fuller reading of this parable in Luke 11 verses 21 to 22. Listen. When a strong man fully armed guards his own homestead, his possessions are undisturbed.

But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he has relied and distributes his plunder. In this parable, Jesus is revealing his own vision of reality, his own worldview.

He's revealing his understanding of the fallen human condition and he's revealing his understanding of his role in this condition. According to Jesus, the world is a house under siege.

[17 : 15] According to Jesus, the world is occupied by a strong enemy. Beelzebub, one of the words scripture gives to Satan, means lord of the house.

In his parable, Jesus is affirming what the rest of scripture teaches. That at some point in time before the world was made, one of the angelic beings whom God had made rebelled.

Why? All we are told is that this being created to serve God and God's purposes didn't like being under the authority of God. So he decided to declare independence and begin an angelic revolution.

This decision brought evil into existence. God created no evil. Nothing God made is evil. This being, Satan, the devil, the accuser, became evil as a result of his decision to declare independence.

From that time on, scripture says, this personal source of evil has been committed to thwarting God's purposes in the world. He has worked so hard and he has gained such influence that the apostle John can even say the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

[18 : 33] behind the movements of human history, behind powerful human structures that oppress people, lies the operation of what the apostle Paul calls principalities and powers or powers, dominions, rulers, and authorities, a whole host of angelic agents carrying out the evil one's designs.

According to Jesus' parable, these demonic forces have infiltrated our existence and to some degree hold humanity hostage.

Actually, they do more than that. The enemy seeks to destroy humanity. Not because he hates us, but because he hates God.

He wants to destroy God, but since he cannot get at God, he goes after what God has made. He especially goes after creatures made in the image of God.

Since he cannot get at God, I mean, after all, he is not God's equal, he goes after what is closest to God's heart. He goes after humans. Like the mafia.

[19 : 48] mafia. When the mafia cannot bring a business person down, the mafia goes after the business person's family. They kidnap his children.

The world is under siege by a strong man. In his first parable, Jesus then reveals what he has come to do. He has come to plunder the strong man's house.

He has come to set the hostages free. I like how Benjamin Britton puts it in his Christmas anthem. This little babe, so few days old, has come to rifle Satan's fold.

All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold to shake. For in this weak, unarmed wise, the gates of hell will be surprised. So, we read in the ninth chapter of his gospel, where Mark tells us about a boy with symptoms akin to epilepsy being brought to Jesus.

Jesus sees through those symptoms to the presence of evil. And without magical spells or weird incantations, Jesus simply says to evil, you deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and do not enter him again.

[21 : 13] In the fifth chapter of his gospel, Mark tells us about a man with a violent, uncontrollable personality. Mark says of the man, no one was able to bind him anymore, even with a chain, he would break the chains apart.

Jesus sees through this abnormal behavior to the presence of not one, but a legion of spirits. And again, without any fanfare, he says, come out of the man, you unclean spirit.

Now here, we need to be very careful. because Jesus does not attribute all sickness or all personality disorders or all violence to the demonic.

He does not do that. Most illness and most disorders in the world are due to us, to the sin of humanity. Jesus comes into the world to bring us into wholeness.

Sometimes we need forgiveness, sometimes we need physical healing, sometimes we need psychological healing, and sometimes we need to be delivered from the work of Jesus' enemy.

[22 : 16] Jesus is the stronger man who comes to plunder the strong man's house. He comes to set the captives free. Can I get at least one amen?

Amen. Now he does this by binding the strong man.

Not by destroying, at least not yet, but by binding. This binding begins in the wilderness of temptation, when the Satan came and tempted him three times.

Three times the enemy seeks to deflect Jesus from his mission. Three times Jesus stands. Three times Jesus wins. And he emerges from the wilderness with his gospel.

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. But the real binding takes place at the cross. As Jesus is being arrested, he says to Judas and the soldiers, when I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me, but this is now your hour and the power of darkness.

[23 : 31] Jesus recognizes he's now moving into final confrontation. The soldiers take him away and Jesus does not resist.

This is being the stronger man. During the mockery of a trial, he does not defend himself. This is being the stronger man.

When he's beaten and spat upon, he does not retaliate. This is how to be the stronger man. He's forced to carry his own cross up the hill to Golgotha.

This is the way to bind evil. The forces of evil, I'm sure, were delighted in Jesus' behavior. The evil one's henchmen had to be rejoicing.

I could imagine them saying, so, Jesus of Nazareth, you've come to destroy us, have you? You won in the desert, but now you're going to be defeated. Finally, Satan could get to God as God now is in the form of Jesus.

[24 : 44] And then Jesus dies. And as he dies, a whole bunch of other strange things begin to happen. Like, the curtain in the temple being torn in two, the earth shaking, rocks splitting, and graves opening.

Graves were opening. As Jesus is being taken down by evil to death, graves were opened. Yes, because in the moment Jesus died, death lost its grip.

Jesus' death is the death of death. As one of my mentors used to say, in death, when death stung Jesus Christ, it stung itself to death, and death had to let the captives go.

Which means, Jesus had just robbed the strong man, and one of his greatest weapons, the fear of death. The strong man could no longer hold the captives through the threat of death.

Death is no longer the boogeyman it once was. Jesus has defanged death. That's why the writer of Hebrews could later write then, through death, Jesus rendered powerless, the one who had the power of death, that is the devil, that he, Jesus, might deliver those who through the fear of death, were subject to slavery all their lives.

[26 : 19] Just before Jesus dies, the powers of hell were rejoicing. Finally, we got him, and now we're going to get all he made. But in the moment Jesus died, they stopped rejoicing, because it dawned on them that Jesus had just won.

Now, this is what Mel Gibson tried to help us see in his film, The Passion of the Christ. Remember that snaky figure who shows up at different places in the life of Jesus?

He's moving in the background as Jesus stands before Caiaphas and Annas, the high priest. He's moving in the background as Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate. And he's moving in the background as Jesus is dying on the cross.

And then remember what happened to that snaky figure as Jesus dies? The snake, the evil one, screams out in desperation and then begins to whirl down, down, down, down.

That's because in the moment Jesus died, he overcame the evil one. The stronger man, through this apparently weak way, had bound the strong man.

[27 : 40] And on Easter morning, he rose from the dead and now continues to plunder the strong man's house. The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world turns out to be the lion that takes down the evil one.

So, what are the implications for us at this time and in this city? First, the personal implication. We need no longer fear the evil one in his desire to destroy.

We can now say to him, Jesus has bound you and you have no authority over me. Be gone. In those moments, when we sense we are being hassled or tormented or attacked by evil, we can take our stand in Jesus and in Jesus' name say, you leave me and my family alone.

I had to do it a number of times this past week as I struggled to write this sermon. I have to tell you, many times during the week, I said, what possessed me to take this text?

I'm just going to choose an easier text. And in those moments, I just put my pencil down and I said, you leave me alone. I belong to Jesus and I'm going to tell the truth.

[29 : 11] You may be strong, but Jesus is stronger. You back off. Second implication is social. Jesus has given his disciples his authority over the demonic.

Matthew, Mark, Luke all emphasize this. Jesus has given his authority over the demonic to his disciples. So when the 70 disciples returned from this short term mission project on which Jesus had sent them, they tell Jesus with joy, Lord, even the demons are accountable to us in your name. In your name. There is authority and power in Jesus name. And so we read in the book of Acts stories of how the church was used to bring release to the captives.

In Philippi, for example, the apostle Paul and Luke, the physician, were being hassled by this servant girl. She had a spirit of divination as Luke called it. And she kept following Paul and Luke all around, hassling them.

She would yell out, these men are bondservants of the Most High and are proclaiming the way of salvation. And she kept that up for days. Finally, Paul had enough. He turned around and he said, not to the girl, but to the spirit.

[30 : 31] In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her. And it did. And she was free. And the gospel went forth in power. The church never need power in the face of evil.

Indeed, the church can now dare to move into Satan's stronghold and in Jesus name announce release to the captives. You know the saying of Jesus, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Most of the people, most people read that as the, in this way, that Jesus is going to build his church in the world and the gates of hell are going to try to destroy the church, but will not succeed. Now that's true.

As Jesus builds his church in the world, the gates of hell will try to overcome, but will not succeed. But that's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that he will build his church and the church will move into hell's strongholds and the gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

That's why when the gospel is announced in a city, the city begins to change.

[31 : 47] Not only because individuals change, but because the powers of darkness and deceit, the forces of oppression and exploitation are moved.

One of my favorite contemporary Christian songs is by the news boys called He Reigns. It's the song of the redeemed rising from the African plain. It's the song of the forgiven drowning out the Amazon rain.

The song of Asian believers filled with God's holy fire. It's every tribe, every tongue, every nation, a song of love born of a grateful choir. It's all God's children singing, Glory, glory, hallelujah.

He reigns. He reigns. It's all God's children singing, Glory, glory, hallelujah. He reigns. He reigns. And then this line. And all the powers of darkness tremble at what they've just heard.

That happens every time we worship in the name of Jesus. The powers of darkness tremble. For once again, they realize that the stronger man has bound them.

[33 : 02] You spirits behind pornography, you are strong. But Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free.

Use spirits behind human trafficking. Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free.

Use spirits behind prostitution. You're strong, but Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free.

Use spirits behind drug abuse and drug dealing. You're strong, but Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free. Use spirits behind gang warfare.

Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free. Use spirits behind the confusion and chaos in the city.

[34 : 17] Jesus is stronger than you, and he binds you, and you must let the captives go free.

Though this world with devils filled, though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear.

For God hath willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure.

One little word shall fell him, and that one little word is the name Jesus. Lord.

Lord. It's so hard to keep perspective. In this world where we seek to follow you, and we keep forgetting.

So thank you for your word, where once again you break out, and you tell us that you are stronger than anything that threatens to undo God's good creation.

[35 : 57] Thank you. Thank you that you know what each of us face. You know those particular manifestations of evil we face.

Thank you that you now give us the authority to say in your name, you be gone. You. and will you teach us what it means now to walk through this city and as we encounter evil exercise the authority you have given to your church all blessing, honor, glory dominion be unto you now and forevermore Amen