

The worlds strongest man

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[0 : 00] Are you a fan of the world's strongest man?

I'm referring to the TV program that always seems to appear around about Christmas time. I get other times of the year as well, but there always seems to be one or two episodes around about Christmas and New Year.

And you may be familiar with the program. One of the tasks that is performed as these men compete with one another to establish who is the world's strongest is the truck pool.

Again, you may be able to visualize that. They have this kind of bandana around their forehead that's attached to some large vehicle, a truck. And from a standing start, they have to move the vehicle a certain distance.

And it's timed. It's painful to watch all their sinews as they are just about to burst with the effort. I wonder if sometime they might want to establish an alternative version that involved a bicycle pool that I could compete.

[1 : 14] But as it is at the moment, I don't think it's really an option for myself. Well, at the heart of the passage that we've read this morning, we have a parable concerning a strong man's house and, implicit in the parable, a stronger man.

We might wish to call him the world's strongest man who enters and binds the strong man. What we want to do is to study the whole of the passage, all of what we've read, in the light of this one short parable.

That will form the basis upon which we'll think not only of the parable, but the material that we find before the parable and subsequent to the parable.

So, what we'll try and do to begin with is to familiarize ourselves with the parable, understand the parable, who is represented by the characters in it, and what is represented by the mission that is performed in the house of the strong man.

And having done that, to then notice in the passage how different people respond to the strongest man, the stronger man, the one who enters and binds the strong man in his own house.

[2 : 42] How do people respond to this character? Well, let's think first of all then of the parable itself, and let's read again in verse 27. It is very short, and in one verse it's contained, this particular parable.

And we read there, 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. That's the picture that's being painted, and we can visualize it without any great difficulty. What is described, what goes on in what we read there.

And we really need to establish three things in order to familiarize ourselves and to establish what the parable is about, who the parable is about, and what it's about. We need to establish the identity of the strong man.

Who is this strong man that is referred to in the parable, but also the identity of the one who enters his house. One enters his house and ties up the strong man.

[3 : 55] And then also the mission of this mystery intruder, this stronger man who is able to enter in and tie up the strong man.

First of all, then, the identity of the strong man. I think from the preceding verses, it's clear enough that Jesus is identifying the strong man with Satan.

In the verses that precede this little parable, this is the one who has been spoken about. And verse 27 clearly follows on almost seamlessly from what goes before, even in its introduction.

In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house. So this strong man, it would appear, has been identified by Jesus with Satan, who in turn, in the course of the narrative, has been identified with

Beelzebub.

The religious leaders had accused Jesus of doing what he did in the power of Beelzebub. And in responding to them, Jesus then speaks of Satan.

[5 : 02] And it's very clear that he is using that name to identify with the one of whom he has been accused, Beelzebub.

So Beelzebub, Satan, the strong man, they're all one and the same character. But who is he? Who is this character?

Who is this one presented in the parable as the strong man? Well, this unusual and somewhat intriguing name that he has given by the religious authorities, Beelzebub, points us in the right direction of who he is.

The derivation of that name is contested, but its most likely meaning is Beel the prince, with the sense of the prince of demons.

Indeed, that is what is evidently what is understood by those who use the name. Then in verse 27, he is possessed by Beelzebub, by the prince of demons.

[6 : 04] He is driving out demons. Those using the name identify Beelzebub as the prince of demons. He's the one who rules over the realm of evil.

The more familiar name that we find also in the passage that Jesus uses, Satan, means adversary, the meaning of the name. He is the adversary of God and of all that is good.

Now maybe some of you, even as you hear me speaking about Beelzebub and Satan and the strong man, maybe you're thinking, well, this is crazy talk. There will be plenty of people who would come to that conclusion.

This is crazy talk. Satan, Beelzebub, what are you talking about? If you're even thinking that what I'm talking about and this theme is crazy talk, I would urge caution.

Notice that this is what Jesus' family feared concerning Jesus. He is out of his mind, was the conclusion they had come to, or certainly others had come to and had passed on to them.

[7 : 16] He is out of his mind, and yet a saner man has never lived. So the identity of the strong man.

Well, Jesus, I think, clearly identifies him with Satan. But then we have to establish the identity of the one who enters the strong man's house. Now, the one who enters and the one who then goes on to bind the strong man must, by definition, be stronger, or else he would be unable to do what he does.

Who is this stronger one? Well, again, it's clear that Jesus, if somewhat obliquely, is referring to himself.

He is the stronger or more powerful one. And we need to think about even the language as well as the picture that it paints. We need to think about it in the light of what we have already learned concerning Jesus in Mark's gospel.

Let's just refresh our memory of what we've already learned, even in the few chapters that we've been able to study thus far. For example, listen to what John the Baptist said concerning Jesus that Mark records for us.

[8 : 30] In the first chapter, reading from verse 7, And this was his message, the message of John the Baptist. After me will come one more powerful than I, a stronger one, a more powerful one, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Who is this one who will come? Well, Jesus speaks of him as the stronger one, the more powerful one. But then notice also what is said concerning Jesus and what Jesus experiences at his baptism in verse 10 of that first chapter. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. The Spirit of God descends on Jesus at the time of his baptism, at the beginning of his public ministry, to empower him.

Jesus will perform his mission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, the relevance of this will become more apparent in a moment when we think of the seriousness of the charge that is leveled against him.

But that's for a moment ahead. So, the identity of the one who enters. Well, the parable, it would seem, is pointing to Jesus himself as the stronger one, the one able to tie up the strong man, to bind him.

[10:02] But then finally, let's notice the mission of the stronger one. What will he do in this house that he enters? Well, I think we find three things that he does.

He enters the house, he ties up the strong man, and he carries off his possessions. All of these things are mentioned even in this short verse, verse 27.

And of course, Jesus entered into the realm of Satan. Satan is described in John's Gospel in chapter 12 and verse 31 as the prince of this world.

And Jesus entered into this world over which Satan is presented as the prince. Not the one who enjoys absolute authority, but nonetheless, in a sense described by the Bible itself as the prince of this world.

Jesus entered into his world, into enemy territory, you might say. And he did so by his incarnation. He entered into the strong man's house.

[11:08] But then, of course, Jesus also tied up the strong man by his work on the cross. By dealing with sin, he removed that which Satan could use to hold us in his grip.

Sin, as it were, are the chains that imprison us and keep us in the grip of Satan. They were removed by Jesus by his death on the cross in our place.

He won a victory over the strong man at Calvary. This is the point that Paul makes as he writes to the believers in Colossae. In chapter 2 and verse 15, we read, And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

The mission of Jesus, a mission that proved successful, was to defeat and bind Satan. Notice that the very first act of the spirit who descended on him to empower him and to direct him, was to send him out into the desert, immediately following his baptism.

Why? That he might confront his adversary. That he might confront the one he had come to do battle with. The oppressed.

[12:37] Those oppressed by the evil one. Those oppressed by Satan. The oppressed cannot be released from their oppression until the oppressor is bound.

You can't go straight to the oppressed and say, I want you to live a free life until the oppressor has been dealt with. That is the order in which things must take place.

Yes, liberation comes before restoration. Yes, it is God's great purpose to restore us. Indeed, to change us and renew us and recreate in us a new man after the image of his son.

But in order for that to even begin, we need to be liberated from oppression. Liberation comes before restoration. It's worth noting that in what we see of Jesus, even in these first few chapters of Mark, and indeed what is causing such dismay to the religious authorities, his casting out of demons is something that Jesus does, both motivated by a desire to liberate the oppressed, but also that he might point forward to his imminent and certain ultimate victory over the prince of demons.

Each demon that is cast out, each man or woman liberated by Jesus in his earthly ministry, points to that greater victory over the prince of demons.

[14:19] Before we move on, it's good to just pause for a moment and remind ourselves that the victory won by Jesus that the victory won by Jesus is a victory that holds today.

Satan is bound. He may well be and indeed is a fierce opponent who hates us and would see us fall and suffer, but he is bound.

He is bound now. He is a defeated foe. So the mission of the one who enters into the house, well, it's to enter, it's to tie up the strong man, but then also we have the language of the one who enters carrying off the possessions of the strong man.

And again, we see the way in which this is true of Jesus. Jesus liberates those who are in the grip of Satan, be that consciously or unconsciously, and of course for most it is unconsciously.

Indeed, all this Satan talk would seem very bizarre to most people. And for the avoidance of doubt, those who he has come to carry off, to liberate, to free from the strong man, that would be you and me.

[15:35] He can liberate you. That is what he came to do, to secure your liberty, to secure your freedom, to secure your release from oppression and slavery, to sin and to the evil one.

Well, that's the parable. How do people respond to the stronger one? How do people respond to the one who is able to bind the strong man?

And in what we read before the parable and in what we read following the parable, we're confronted with different responses to the world's strongest man, to the stronger man.

And the response that we find is twofold. There are those who respond by seeking to bind Jesus, to bind the stronger man, and there are those who respond by bowing to the stronger man.

To bind or to bow. It's one or other that is found in the response that there is. And let's think of each in turn. First of all, those who seek to bind Jesus.

[16:46] And those who seek to bind Jesus can also be divided into two groups or two categories. There are the religious, the teachers of the law as they're described, but there's also the relatives, the very family of Jesus on this occasion.

First of all, let's think about the religious. In verse 22, we read, 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. Now there's one thing that the religious can't do. And this alone is significant. They can't deny that Jesus is doing what he claims to do.

Their attack isn't grounded on, Oh no, he's just a charlatan. You know, he claims to cast out demons, but he's not really achieving it. It appears to be the case. No, that would be a line of argument that would have been met with ridicule by the people because the people knew that, No, he does do that.

He really does have the power. And that's how Jesus really is set apart from the charlatans we see on our TV screens, on God TV, who claim all kinds of marvels.

[17:53] And yet, on close examination, we discover that they can easily be shown to be a piece of nonsense. But you see, the religious leaders here, they don't do that. They say, Oh no, he does drive out demons.

That we cannot deny. So because they can't deny, they decide to defame. That is their line of attack. Not to deny. That would achieve nothing.

It would be ridiculed. So they defame. And the manner in which they defame is in this wicked way of attributing the power to Satan.

Yes, he drives out demons, but he does so by the prince of demons. And of course, in this way, they seek to bind Jesus. By attributing his power to Satan, they hope to undermine both his authority and his popularity.

Who wants to be in league with the devil? Or indeed, or in any case, in one who is acting by the power of the devil.

[18:57] What did Jesus make of their efforts to bind him? Well, in his response, he identifies their efforts as both illogical and evil. Both of these things.

The parables in verses 23 to 26, before we arrive at the one that we began with by considering the ones that lead up to that parable, they all make this point.

What Jesus says is what you're claiming, it makes no sense. It's illogical. How can Satan be one who would attack his own? A house divided against itself cannot stand.

A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. We're familiar with the pictures that are being painted. And Jesus simply says, what you're saying makes no sense. It's illogical. And on that grounds, it's invalid.

But it's not only illogical, this defamation that he is the victim of. What they are doing is also evil.

[19:59] Their sin is described as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. There in what follows in the passage in verse 29, But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven.

He is guilty of an eternal sin. Now this sin of which Jesus speaks has and continues to be the object of much frenzied speculation.

What is this about? This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that cannot be forgiven. It's not my intention to give an exhaustive explanation of what we are to make of this sin, but I would highlight three aspects of this sin that we can draw from what is said in the passage before us.

Notice we're considering how Jesus responds to their attacks, and he identifies their attack as evil. Not only illogical, but evil. Particularly, falling into the committing of this particular sin, or at any rate, coming very close to doing so.

What three things can we say about this sin? Well, first of all, we can note that it is extreme in its character. It is evil in the extreme. But what is it?

[21:18] Mark tells us, certainly on this occasion, what the sin is. Sometimes it's thought of as being very mysterious. Oh, what could it be? But Mark tells us. Mark does something here that he very seldom does.

He adds an editorial comment. Verse 30 is that. It's an editorial comment. He said this. Mark is explaining. You're wondering, well, why did Jesus say this? Very strange thing. And Mark says he said this because they were saying, the religious leaders, they were saying he has an evil spirit. So Mark is very clear. This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, what is it?

It's what these guys were doing. So we don't need to think this is very mysterious. No, it's what these guys were doing. Mark tells us that. And it's very helpful that he does. It is the sin the leaders of the law were committing or at any rate in danger of committing and so they are warned solemnly about it.

The religious leaders were attributing the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice what we've already seen about his baptism and how Jesus does what he does in the power of the Holy Spirit. They're attributing that work to the evil spirit, to Satan.

[22 : 27] Jesus was casting out demons in the power of the Holy Spirit and yet they claimed he was both possessed by and acting in the power of Satan.

They were calling that which is good, that which is altogether good, that which is altogether holy, they were calling it evil, altogether evil.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a specific and definable defamation of the person and character of God in this particularly heinous way.

In this instance, it involved the religious leaders looking at Jesus and the work that he was doing and concluding, that man is the devil or that man is in league with the devil, that man is acting by the power of the devil.

That is what they were doing. So it is a sin that is extreme in its character. That's the first thing we can say about it. I think we can also say this. We can deduce this, that it is a sin that is never followed by repentance.

[23 : 36] The question that arises and that people have great difficulty with, and understandably so, why is it that this sin is described as a sin that will never be forgiven?

Does that not run contrary to everything we understand about free forgiveness? And however grave your sin, however bad you are, you can be forgiven. And we read this and we think, well, what's going on?

Why is it then so described as a sin that will never be forgiven? Is it because it is so evil? Well, possibly, that is the reason. But I suspect that is a more pressing reason.

Namely, that repentance is not sought. The ESV, the English Standard Version, translates the expression in verse 29 in this way, whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness.

Slightly different way of translating what Mark writes. Never has forgiveness. And I think that captures the sense of what has been said by Jesus. They never have forgiveness.

[24 : 47] Why? Because this sin is never accompanied by repentance. They never ask for forgiveness. They never seek repentance. And so, repentance is indeed never granted.

And it's very important for you to be very clear on this. There is no record in the Bible of anyone asking to be forgiven and being denied forgiveness.

You can search as much as you wish. you will not find such an occasion. I think in this regard, it's been helpfully noted that if you are concerned that you have committed this sin, that concern in and of itself is evidence that you are not guilty as repentant concern does not accompany this sin.

However, we understand the nature of the sin and we've sought with the help of Mark to try and identify what it is. It's extreme in its nature. It's extremely evil.

It's not followed by, it's not accompanied by repentance but also we're told that it is a sin that is eternal in its consequences. It's also described in this very scary language.

[26 : 01] He is guilty of an eternal sin. What does that mean? I think it simply means that it is a sin that has eternal consequences for those who are guilty of it.

So the religious seek to bind Jesus and their attempts to bind Jesus, they can't deny what he does so they defame him. That is responded to by Jesus by noticing and identifying how what they say is illogical but it's not only illogical, it's evil.

But they're not the only ones who try and bind Jesus. There's also another group, a surprising group, less hostile it would seem and yet also identified as trying in some way to bind Jesus and those are his very own family members.

In their own way they attempt to bind Jesus. The parable and the dialogue with the religious leaders is sandwiched between these two occasions when we find those described as his family are engaged in this attempt to bind Jesus.

Let's just notice the two verses. In verse 21 we read, when his family heard about this they went to take charge of him for they said he is out of his mind.

[27 : 21] They went to take charge of him. Now no doubt their intentions were worthy. No doubt they were concerned for him. No doubt they were driven in a measure by love for him and they see what's going on and they need to take charge of the situation.

They stand in judgment over Jesus. They think we know better. We know better and so we will take charge of him. The language is almost like the language of an intervention that we heed of. People who are unable to live in a way that they're saving to themselves and there's an intervention. Well this seems to be what has been proposed here. And his family think they know better and so they want to bind him.

They want him to do what they think he should do. We need to be very careful about that. We might say well how does that apply to me? Well how can we sometimes play with Jesus that he might be what we want him to be?

That we would follow him in the way that we want to follow him? That he would say what we want him to say? So they try and bind him in this way. But then at the end of the passage we find a similar scenario.

[28 : 34] It may well be just a follow on from what we've read in verse 21. Having decided to do this will the family then appear? And in verse 31 we read then Jesus his mother and brothers arrived standing outside they sent someone in to call him.

As I say it's really the same issue. The family think that they know best. And there's also even in the language that it's used although I'm not for a moment suggesting that it's deliberate but I think there's a poignant irony in his family calling him on the outside and they call Jesus that he would go to them.

They're calling him when as we've discovered even in this chapter that Jesus is the one with authority to call us. The tables have been turned.

The family want to turn the tables. We'll call him. He doesn't call us. What about you? Do you think that you know best?

You listen. You hear the call of Jesus to repent and to believe but you know best. Not today. Not now.

[29 : 51] I know best. I'll answer when I'm good and ready in my own time. I'm in charge. Are you standing outside looking in in judgment?

But there is another response to the stronger man. There are those who seek to bind him. Of course they fail in their attempts but that's their what they seek to do.

But then there are also those who bow down before him. And it is the disciples who bow before Jesus. And we see this in where they are and in what they do.

Where are they? Well we're told by Jesus in this very tender language. Verse 34 we read then Jesus looked at those seated in a circle around him and said where are they?

Where are they? The disciples of Jesus where are they? They're in a circle around him. They're with him. Remember what discipleship is about.

[31 : 03] We've seen it in the same chapter. Jesus called them to be with him and to be sent by him. And here they are. They're with him. They're not outside. No they're in a circle around him.

They're with him. Bowing before him. That's where they are. And what do they do? Well Jesus tells us what they do. Verse 35 whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.

That's what they do. They do God's will. They do God's will by trusting in Jesus and they do God's will by their obedience to Jesus as they are sent by him.

That second feature of discipleship that Jesus himself has presented to us. Disciples bow before Jesus.

They are with him and they are obedient to him. And again I ask you the question where are you? Where are you?

[32 : 06] Are you in that circle sitting around him? And let me be very clear. This is an open circle. Some people think it's a closed circle.

They think oh yeah that's a good picture of what it is to be a Christian this closed circle of the holier than thou. No it's an open circle. Anybody can join the circle. You can join the circle.

You can come inside and sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to Jesus and obey Jesus and follow Jesus. You can come inside. he welcomes you.

Come. Come to me. Where are you? What are you doing? Are you doing God's will? And at the very top of the list of God's will for you, whatever else might be involved, is that you trust in his son. That is doing God's will. Trusting in the one that he has provided for you. coming to Jesus in repentance and faith and asking Jesus to be your savior.

[33 : 15] That is how you do God's will. And then the adventure follows. That's where it begins. Are you with the world's strongest man?

Jesus has the strength to save you. He has the strength to forgive you. He has the strength to carry you. He has the strength to change and transform you. Or do you stand in opposition, aloof, outside, to the strongest man?

And that is not a good place to be. Come to Jesus. Repent and believe in him. Trust in Jesus. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for the manner in which we have presented to us your only begotten son, the eternal son of God, the one who entered into this world to rescue and to liberate and to redeem.

[34 : 28] We thank you that his mission was altogether successful, that he has entered the strong man's house and he has bound the strong man and is able to carry away the strong man's possessions.

He is able to liberate all who would look to him. We thank you that it is indeed so, that there is none in the history of the world who has come in sincerity of faith and sought forgiveness, that has been denied forgiveness.

We thank you that as we come and as we must come time after time seeking to be forgiven, so you are the God who delights in forgiving us.

We pray that it would be our growing and increasing desire to be those who are with Jesus, listening to him and obeying him and following him.

And all of these things we pray in his name. Amen.