

Questioned

Jesus has authority over all creation, including Satan.

Questions about authority come up quite often in families. Parents face them regularly as they guide their children from infancy to maturity. They have to teach their babies what “no” means. As the children grow older, parents face the tensions of directing them to go to bed at night, get up in the morning, brush their teeth, finish their homework, and come to dinner. Children push back on the authority of their parents with an assortment of “why” questions. Adolescence brings its own set of challenges that swirl around the issue of parental authority. Teenagers begin to consider their bedrooms to be their personal spaces in which they live in absolute liberty. Parents challenge their perspective with instructions about cleaning up their bedrooms, turning off their lights, and picking up their dirty clothes. Questions about authority come into view when parents meet “this is my room” statements with “this is my house” replies.

Property owners find themselves dealing with questions about authority in their relationships with their neighbors. Limits of authority set by property lines can be questioned when trees need to be planted or fences need to be constructed. Neighbors negotiate the placement of trees and fences by establishing their property lines so they can agree on the reach of their authority. Once the limit of the reach of their authority has been clarified, they can proceed with their plans for their trees and fences.

Important questions about the limits of authority come up in the world of law and order. Police officers get questioned about their authority by drivers who text while they travel. Drivers who get pulled over bring up the police officer’s authority to give them a ticket. When the drivers appear in court, they may even question the judge about the reach of judicial authority.

The passage in Mark’s Gospel for this session brings the authority of Jesus into consideration. Critics of Jesus raised questions about the limits of His authority, and His followers did not comprehend the reach of His authority. This passage underscores the reality that Jesus has authority over all creation. He even has authority over Satan.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Mark 3:7–5:43

The crowd coming to see Jesus kept on growing as He continued to preach, teach, drive out demons, and heal the sick. He chose twelve disciples (apostles) to follow Him so He could train them to carry out His ministry (Mark 3:7-19).

The crowd gathered to the extent that Jesus and those with Him were not even able to eat a meal. Jesus's family attempted to restrain Him, believing He was out of His mind, while the scribes accused Him of being demon possessed. Jesus proclaimed that what He did was through the Holy Spirit, and those who did God's will were His family (vv. 20-35).

Jesus taught the crowd in parables. He told a parable about four kinds of soil, which signified four kinds of responses to His message about the kingdom of God. Jesus also shared a parable about putting a lamp under a basket in reference to the message of the kingdom of God not remaining hidden. Jesus then told two other parables to describe the kingdom of God. Afterward He would explain the plain meaning of the parables to His disciples (4:1-34).

After this Jesus and His disciples traveled across the Sea of Galilee to the Gerasene region. On the way, while Jesus was sleeping, they encountered a fierce storm. The disciples cried out to Jesus, who calmed the storm and then questioned their lack of faith. Arriving in the region of the Geresenes, they encountered a demon-possessed man. Jesus cast the demons out of the man. As a result, the people of the region begged Jesus to leave, while the man himself begged Jesus that he might remain with Him. Instead Jesus directed him to go home and tell what Jesus had done for him (4:35–5:20).

Once Jesus and His disciples returned to Galilee, they encountered a synagogue leader named Jairus. He pleaded with Jesus to heal his dying daughter. On His way to Jairus's home, a woman who suffered with a serious illness touched Jesus's clothes. She was instantly healed, and Jesus affirmed her faith. At about that time, Jairus received the news that his daughter had died. Jesus took Peter, James, and John with Him to Jairus's home. They witnessed the miracle He performed by bringing the girl back to life. He directed those present not to share what they had witnessed (5:21-43).

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

Skeptics (Mark 3:20-22)

As Jesus carried out His work, He encountered skeptics who did not understand Him or His messianic purpose. His own family misunderstood His work, and so did the Jewish leaders who investigated the miracles He performed.

VERSE 20

Jesus entered a house, and the crowd gathered again so that they were not even able to eat.

One day at a house **the crowd gathered again** to see Jesus. The house may have been that of Simon and Andrew in Capernaum (Mark 1:29). The gathering of the people was so great that Jesus and those with Him **were not even able to eat** a meal. In first-century Greco-Roman society, people usually ate two meals each day: breakfast and dinner. Breakfast consisted of flat bread and a piece of cheese, fruit, or olives. The men and boys in the family often took their breakfast with them and ate it on their way to work. Dinner was the primary meal of each day, and although it may have been little more than a simple pot of stew, it gave them the nourishment they needed. Bread was often used to scoop the stew out of the pot as there were no spoons or forks.

The crowd gathered at the house could have become somewhat demanding and even unruly if they were ignored. However, it was His compassion that prompted Jesus to forego a meal and meet the needs of the multitude.

VERSE 21

When his family heard this, they set out to restrain him, because they said, “He’s out of his mind.”

News about the ministry of Jesus in Capernaum had reached His **family** in Nazareth, Jesus’s hometown. They apparently found what was going on to be so disturbing that they made the journey from Nazareth to Capernaum in order to intervene and take Jesus back to Nazareth with them. Elsewhere, Mark identified Jesus as “the son of Mary” and “the brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon.” His sisters are not identified by name (6:3). His human father, Joseph, is not mentioned, and it is

thought that by this time he may have died. However, Joseph apparently trained his son to be a carpenter (v. 3).

Jesus's family only had a limited understanding of His identity. They did not fully grasp the nature of His messianic mission. They seem to have surmised that His ministry had consumed Him to the point that Jesus was **out of His mind**. The Greek term (*existemi*) can mean to be astonished or amazed (2:12; 5:42; 6:51), but here has the meaning of losing one's mind, of being insane.

As a result, they traveled to Capernaum **to restrain** Jesus. His family desired to help Jesus and protect the family's reputation by getting Him under control and no doubt bringing Him back home to Nazareth. They may also have been concerned about Jesus's confrontations with those in power. Such conflicts could have jeopardized Jesus's safety.

VERSE 22

The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and, “He drives out demons by the ruler of the demons.”

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent **the scribes** to Capernaum to investigate the reports about Jesus's preaching and works. They **had come down** from Jerusalem because of the city's elevated location in the hill country of Judah. While Jesus's family may have had His best interest at heart, the scribes didn't share their sentiments. Their chief concern had to do with the laws of Judaism. Considered the experts in the Jewish law (written and oral), the scribes had been sent to pass judgment on Jesus's ministry, weighing it against the accepted standards of first-century Judaism.

After the scribes examined the nature of Jesus's ministry, they concluded that the miracles He performed were due to supernatural power. However, they identified that power by accusing Jesus of being **possessed by Beelzebul**. *Beelzebul* (“lord of the house/temple”) was the name of a Canaanite god, Baal, who was worshiped at the Philistine city of Ekron in the Old Testament period (see also Matt. 12:24; Luke 11:15). Some commentators as well as the following verses suggest in this context that *Beelzebul* was being used as another name for Satan.¹

After the scribes announced that Beelzebul possessed Jesus, they went even further in their effort to discredit Him. They claimed that Jesus drove demons out of their victims only because **the ruler of demons** had empowered Him. Their words were an attempt to connect Jesus with Satan, who they considered to be *the ruler of demons*. According to their

logic, Jesus's authority came from Satan, which enabled Him to cast out the lesser demons under Satan's authority.

Explore Further

Study the article "Devil, Satan, Evil, Demonic" on page 419 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How powerful is Satan? What are the limits to his power? What does it mean that Satan and demons can tempt believers but not cause believers to sin?

Strong Man? (Mark 3:23-27)

Some people may not question the truth of the gospel, but for various reasons they may reject that God has any authority over them. The Jewish religious leaders did not question that Jesus performed miracles, but they questioned the source of authority by which He performed those miracles.

VERSE 23

**So he summoned them and spoke to them in parables:
"How can Satan drive out Satan?"**

Jesus must not have been near the scribes when they announced their damaging assessment of His ministry. Otherwise, He would not have needed to summon them to Him so He could respond. When He talked with His twelve disciples, He used direct discourse. However, when He talked with others, He preferred to use parables (Mark 4:10-11). Jesus addressed the scribes' accusation using three parables. He prefaced those parables by raising a question that challenged their contention that He employed the power of Satan to drive out demons under the reign of Satan. **"How can Satan drive out Satan?"** With His question, He framed their accusation in a way that provided an excellent opportunity to refute it.

VERSE 24

"If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand."

Demonstrating the absurdity of the scribes' contention, Jesus drew a logical conclusion from their accusation with His first parable: **“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.”** Comparing the reign of Satan to a kingdom, Jesus pointed out the absurdity of their conclusion. Satan's kingdom could not stand if it was at war with itself. The scribes would have known about a divided kingdom from Israel's history. After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12). This division led to recurring periods of instability due to the infighting amongst the two kingdoms, as well as external wars with enemy nations seeking to control the region.

VERSE 25

“If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.”

With His second parable, Jesus moved His focus from that of a kingdom to that of a **house**. When speaking of the house, He didn't have a building or physical structure in mind. Rather, here it refers to a family or household. Jesus's words would have brought to mind a family composed of parents and siblings who lived and worked together. While such a family maintained a strong bond of unity with each other, they would be safe, secure, and work well together to provide for the needs of the family. However, the strength of the family would be compromised by infighting and disputes within their ranks. A family weakened by internal conflicts would not be able to stand together in the face of challenging situations. Abram recognized this reality and sought to resolve the conflict between himself and his nephew, Lot, concerning a dispute over the use of land for grazing their livestock. Abram worked to mitigate the issue because he did not want their family to be divided over grazing rights (Gen. 13).

VERSE 26

“And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand but is finished.”

Jesus moved from speaking in broad generalities (kingdom, household) to addressing the scribe's accusation that His words and miracles had their source in **Satan** and the demonic. Jesus exposed the absolute absurdity of such an accusation. The scribes had seen that Jesus had cast out demons. The reality of those miracles could not be denied. They reasoned that Satan empowered Jesus to perform the miracles, and they expected everyone in the crowd to believe them. Jesus carried their notion to its natural conclusion, confirming the obvious flaw in their

argument. Satan devotes himself to destruction, and he uses demons to carry out his work. Jesus casting out demons using the power of Satan would be counterproductive. Satan would be at war with himself and his kingdom would collapse. He would be **finished**. The scribes wanted to discredit Jesus by insisting that He worked under the power of Satan. But Jesus turned the tables on them.

VERSE 27

“But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.”

With His third parable, Jesus corrected the scribes’ flawed conclusion as to the source of His miracle-working power. Jesus shifted the scene to a literal house occupied by a **strong man** (Satan). While the strong man protected his house, no one could take anything that belonged to him. Only a stronger man (Jesus) would have the power to **plunder** the strong man’s possessions. To accomplish this, the stronger man would first have to enter the house and tie up the strong man. By taking the strong man captive, the stronger man would then be free to take whatever he wanted from the house.

With this parable, Jesus was declaring that He was in the process of binding the strong man (Satan) through His casting demons out of those who were possessed. Satan was not providing Him with the power to cast out demons. The power came from God and indicated that the kingdom of God had arrived. This will ultimately lead to the defeat of Satan and the end of his evil realm, thereby fulfilling Old Testament messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 49:24-26; 61:1-2 (see Luke 4:16-21).

Explore Further

All authority has been given to Jesus (Matt. 28:18). He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14). What does this mean in relation to your walk with Him? Reflect on the reality that as a believer in Christ you are eternally safe in the arms of your Savior (John 10:27-30) and God promises He will finish the work He has begun in you (Phil. 1:6; see Rom. 8:28-39).

Warning (Mark 3:28-30)

We have all probably heard the phrase, “The point of no return,” meaning there comes a point from which there is no turning back. Some of the Jewish religious leaders in questioning Jesus’s miracles assigned the source of His power to the devil. Jesus warned them that by ascribing the work of the Holy Spirit to demonic forces they were in danger of committing an unforgivable sin.

VERSE 28

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for all sins and whatever blasphemies they utter.”

With His parables, Jesus had set the stage for His rebuttal to the accusation that the scribes had made concerning the source of His power. By introducing His statement with the words **“Truly I tell you,”** Jesus was affirming both the importance of and absolute trustworthiness of what He was about to say. The Greek word for *truly* (*amen*) comes from the Hebrew term meaning “to be reliable” and is used in Mark’s Gospel about fifteen times and always spoken by Jesus.

Jesus began with a general statement, **“People will be forgiven for all sins and whatever blasphemies they utter.”** The Greek word for *forgiven* (*aphiemi*) carries the idea of being put away or going away. It was used of someone who was freed from the consequences of a legal or moral obligation. The term for *sins* (*hamartema*) is derived from a word meaning “to miss the mark” and has a range of meaning from an involuntary mistake to a grievous moral failing. Here it refers to any and all sins committed against God. Through His work on the cross, Jesus would take the punishment for the sins of those who repent of their sins and trust in Him as their Savior and Lord. They will be forgiven and freed of the consequences (death and eternal separation from God) for their sins. The Greek word for *blasphemies* (*blasphemia*) refers to defiant, slanderous, or irreverent language. *Blasphemies* revile, slander, defame, or vilify someone. They can be directed at other people or at God.

VERSE 29

“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”

While Jesus declared that all sins and blasphemies would be forgiven, He went on to make one exception—when such blasphemies were against

the Holy Spirit. Previously, Mark referred to the Holy Spirit three times in his Gospel. The first is related to the ministry of John the Baptist. John proclaimed that Messiah would baptize His followers with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). The second is associated with Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River, when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus “like a dove” (v. 10). Finally, the third reference notes that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness where He spent forty days being tempted by Satan (v. 12).

By bringing up the Holy Spirit in this verse, Jesus underscored the importance of the Spirit’s work in His ministry. The Holy Spirit empowered Jesus so He could be effective in His messianic mission. Accordingly, Jesus performed miracles because the Holy Spirit worked through Him. Therefore, His effectiveness in driving out demons should only be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit.

While different than “unbelief,” the exact meaning of **blasphemes against the Holy Spirit** is debated. After laying out the multiple possible meanings of the term, scholar Robert Stein concludes, “persistent and unremitting resistance to the Spirit’s work as he brings conviction of sin and reveals the need for repentance and faith . . . probably is the best interpretation, for rejection of the Spirit’s work renders faith impossible and salvation unattainable.”² Another source similarly states, it is “a state of hardness in which one consciously and willfully resists God’s saving power and grace. It is a desperate condition that is beyond the situation of forgiveness because one is not able to recognize and repent of sin.”³

Those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit are **guilty of an eternal sin**, “one with infinite consequences.”⁴ The Greek term for *guilty* (*enochos*) can also mean “liable.” The New King James translation reads “is subject to eternal condemnation.”

VERSE 30

because they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

The scribes thought about Jesus in a way that prompted their blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. They saw for themselves the miracles that Jesus performed. However, they refused to affirm that the Holy Spirit was the source. Instead, they declared that **an unclean spirit** had empowered Jesus. They did not commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because of a single remark or a solitary utterance. Rather, they had a settled mindset hostile to God, His will, and His works. Furthermore, with their words they sought to infect the crowd of people with that same belief.

By referring to *an unclean spirit*, the scribes had the demonic influence of Satan in mind. In Mark’s Gospel, the terms *unclean spirit* and

“demon” are used as synonyms. “Demons were evil in themselves, and they made the persons they affected both ceremonially and morally unclean.”⁵ In ascribing Jesus’s power to His having an unclean spirit, the scribes were in fact denying Jesus’s authority as Messiah. While they had heard Jesus’s preaching and seen His miracles for themselves, they refused to attribute His words and works to the power of God. Given that they were the acknowledged experts in God’s law in Jewish society, the scribes should have been the first to recognize and affirm that Jesus was indeed God’s foretold Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. In actuality, Jesus’s miracles were an indication and evidence that in His words and actions the kingdom of God had broken into the world (Mark 1:15) and the works of Satan were being destroyed (1 John 3:8).

Today some Christians struggle with Jesus’s words in Mark 3:28-30. They fear they may have committed or be in danger of committing the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. However, one does not accidentally commit the unpardonable sin, and the fact that a believer is worried about having committed it is a very good indicator that this person has not done so. “One thing is clear. Anyone concerned about this sin has nothing to fear, for such a concern witnesses to a sensitivity and openness to the Spirit’s work, which those who have sinned in this way do not possess.”⁶

Explore Further

While relatively few people may ever commit the unpardonable sin, we are surrounded by lost people in need of the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Make a list of those in your circle of influence who need to hear the good news of the gospel. Spend time daily praying over these people that God would work in their hearts so that they will see their need for Christ and be receptive to hearing the gospel. Also, pray that God would work so as to provide opportunities for you to tell these people about the good news of salvation found in Jesus!

1. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 170; James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 75.

2. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 349.

3. Jerry M. Henry, “Blasphemy,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 224.

4. Brooks, *Mark*, 76.

5. *Ibid.*, 50.

6. Stein, *Luke*, 349; see also France, *Gospel of Mark*, 177.