

Historic Commentary



(Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 3:20-35 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 3](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

Augustine: Now as for the Lord's saying: "Satan cannot drive out Satan," lest perhaps anyone using the name of some of the lowest powers when driving out a demon should think this opinion of the Lord's to be false, let him understand the point of this saying: Satan does spare the body or the senses of the body, but he tempts the senses for the purpose of dominating the will of the man in question, in a triumph of greater import, through the error of impiety. Satan does not strike for the body as such, but rather for the innermost self in order to work in him in the manner described by the apostle: "according to the prince of the power of this air, who is now active in the sons of disobedience." For Satan was not troubling and tormenting the senses of their bodies, nor was he battering their bodies, but he was reigning in their wills, or better, in their covetousness.

Mention has been made of the unclean spirit whom the Lord shows to be divided against himself. The Holy Spirit, however, is not divided against himself. Rather he makes those whom he gathers together undivided against themselves, by dwelling within those who have been cleansed, that they may be like those of whom it is written in the Acts of the Apostles, "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul."

The "strong man" in this passage means the devil who was able to hold the human race in bondage. By his "goods," which Christ was coming to plunder, the devil was keeping for himself those who would in time become faithful, but had remained in the clutches of ungodliness and various sins. It was for the purpose of binding up this strong man that John, in the Apocalypse, saw "an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." The angel checked and repressed his power to seduce and possess those destined to be set free.

He conquered the devil first by righteousness, and then by power. First by righteousness, because he who had no sin was slain by him most unjustly. But then by power, because having been dead he lived again, never afterwards to die. For Christ was crucified, not through immortal power, but through the weakness which he took upon him in mortal

flesh. Of this weakness the apostle nevertheless says, “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

Irenaeus: The adversary enticed humanity to transgress our maker’s law, and thereby got us into his clutches. Yet his power consisted only in tempting the human will toward trespass and apostasy. With these chains he bound up the human will. This is why in the economy of salvation it was necessary that he be bound with the same chains by which he had bound humanity. It would be through a man that humanity would be set free to return to the Lord, leaving the adversary in those bonds by which he himself had been fettered, that is, sin. For when Satan is bound, man is set free; since “none can enter a strong man’s house and spoil his goods, unless he first bind the strong man himself.” It is in this way that he became exposed as the opposer of the Word who made all things, and subdued by his command. The new man showed him to be a fugitive from the law, and an apostate from God. He then was securely bound as a fugitive, and his goods hauled away. These goods are those who had been in bondage, whom he had unjustly used for his own purposes. So it was a just means by which he was led captive, who had led humanity into captivity unjustly. In this way humanity was rescued from the clutches of its possessor by the tender mercy of God the Father, who had compassion on his own handiwork, and gave to it salvation, restoring it by means of the Word, Christ, in order that humanity might learn from this actual event that they receive incorruptibility not of themselves, but by the free gift of God.

Augustine: It is not that this was a blasphemy which under no circumstances could be forgiven, for even this shall be forgiven if right repentance follows it.

Augustine: It is he who said that no one belongs to his family except those who do the will of his Father. To be sure, he graciously included Mary herself in this number, for she was doing the will of his Father. Thus he spurned the earthly name of his mother in comparison to heavenly kinship.... Do not be ungrateful, pay your duty of gratitude to your mother, repay earthly favors by spiritual ones, temporal by eternal ones.

Augustine: What else does he here teach us, than to prefer to kinship “after the flesh” our descent “after the Spirit.” He teaches that persons are united by nearness of spirit to those who are just and holy, and that by obeying and following they cleave to their teaching and conduct. Therefore Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. For to the one who said, “Blessed is the womb, which bore you!” he himself answered: “Blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it.” Concerning his own brothers, his own relatives after the flesh, who at first did not believe in him, he found dubious advantage in being their kin. As for Mary, her nearness as a mother would have been little help for her salvation if she had not borne Christ in her heart in a more blessed manner than in the flesh.

John Calvin:

Mark 3:20: And they come into the house. Mark undoubtedly takes in a somewhat extended period of time, when he passes from the miracles to that wicked conspiracy which the relatives of Christ formed with each other, to bind him as if he had been a

madman. Matthew and Luke mention not more than a single miracle, as having given to the Pharisees an opportunity of slander; but as all the three agree in this last clause which is contained in Mark's narrative, I have thought it proper to insert it here.

It is wonderful that such wickedness should have been found among the relatives of Christ, who ought to have been the first to aid him in advancing the kingdom of God. When they see that he has already obtained some reputation, their ambition leads them to desire that he should be admired in Jerusalem; for they exhort him to go up to that city, that he may show himself more openly, (John 7:3,4.)

But now that they perceive him to be hated on one side by the rulers, exposed on another to numerous slanders, and even despised by the great body of the people--to prevent any injury, or envy, or dishonor, from arising to the whole family, they form the design of laying hands on him, and binding him at home, as if he had been a person who labored under mental derangement; and, as appears from the words of the Evangelist, such was their actual belief.

Hence we learn, first, how great is the blindness of the human mind, in forming such perverse judgments about the glory of God when openly displayed. Certainly, in all that Christ said and did, the power of the Holy Spirit shone magnificently; and if others had not clearly perceived it, how could it be unknown to his relatives, who were intimately acquainted with him? But because Christ's manner of acting does not please the world, and is so far from gaining its good graces that it exposes him to the resentments of many, they give out that he is deranged. Let us learn, in the second place, that the light of faith does not proceed from flesh and blood, but from heavenly grace, that no man may glory in any thing else than in the regeneration of the Spirit; as Paul tells us, If any man wishes to be considered to be in Christ, let him be a new creature, (2 Corinthians 5:17.)