

Mark 3:20-35

I think it's rare for a minister to spend years tending his flock and never have a member come up to him with concern asking, "Pastor, how do I know if I have committed the unforgivable sin?" Perhaps the most common reply pastors give is this, "You won't care in the least that you have committed this sin."

Someone who commits this most grievous sin against the Holy Spirit which, as Jesus puts it in our text, "*never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin,*" is unwilling to repent until his death. When the call to repent is sounded by the pastor in his sermon, such a person refuses to heed that call, not just once, but always.

No pastor, no Christian dare ever accuse someone of having committed this sin. This knowledge is reserved for God alone. Rather, what you, and what every sinner must hear is this: Not one of you is without hope. Yes, truly you are all grievous sinners. So am I. But "*the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.*" Not just some, or even most sins, but *all sin* says the apostle.

There is one who accuses sinners, all sinners. And he is very good at what he does. We call him Satan. Jesus calls him "*a strong man*" in our text. "*No one can enter a strong man's house,*" He says, "*and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.*"

Jesus is called many things in Scripture...the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Messiah, the Savior, and so much more. But here He calls Himself a plunderer; one who enters into a house and takes the goods away from the man who lives there. But it's okay. Jesus is not acting wrongfully. He is acting on your behalf, because that house belongs to the devil, and you are the goods within the devil's house.

How did you get there? You and I were born there. We were not born in God's house. We were born in the devil's house. We were conceived and born in sin, under the curse of the Law, in the domain of darkness. The man of the house in which we were born is a strong man; stronger than any of us; stronger than all of us put together. There is no escape from the strong man's house. We were doomed to spend eternity in that hellhole.

But Jesus changed all of that. He did this by entering the strong man's house. You may recall in January 2007, a boy by the name of Ben Ownby (he lived down by Union and Beaufort...I had him in class back when I was subbing as a teacher). Ben was kidnapped one day by a man who was stronger than him. He grabbed him, put him in his vehicle, and drove off. One of Ben's friends, however, got a description of the vehicle, and after four days officers went to the house of the man who was stronger than Ben and they found him. But they didn't just find Ben. They also found Sean Hornbeck. Sean had been kidnapped years before while out riding his bicycle. He was being held in the strong man's house, and he would still be there today except that Ben was kidnapped and taken to the same house. Sean was rescued from the house of the strong man because Ben became a victim.

This is what Jesus did for you. He became a victim in order to deliver you. Jesus is the one who enters the strong man's house, and once He is in the house, He binds the strong man so that He can plunder his goods. Jesus is the one who enters and plunders. Satan is the strong man. And you are his goods. But we're not told how, in the parable, Jesus enters into the devil's house. Instead, we must observe Jesus carefully to see how He enters the house and binds the strong man.

Satan is the strong man because he grabs power over us. How does he grab this power? By accusing us day after day. Here we are, gathered together before God, but Satan is the strong man, not us. He has power over us because he knows the sins we have done, all of them. He knows that sinful desire is lurking in our hearts. He hears our selfish words. He sees our shameful actions. "Knowledge is power," they say. Well, Satan is empowered over us because day after day, and even when we are here to worship, he knows that we are not the good people we pretend to be. He sees our wretchedness. And he delights in accusing us. "Who do you think you are," he whispers in our minds, "that you have the right to enter here into the presence of the holy God!"

Satan is not divided against himself. Rather, he is against us, every one of us. You and I are trophies up on the mantel in his house, for we know that he is right. We know his accusations are true. We have said those awful things. We have committed those shameful sins. We do have selfish desires lurking in our hearts. It's all true! Even his words to us are true--"What right do we have even to come here and stand before our God?" We have no right. We are nothing but poor, wretched sinners. The strong man binds us with his accusations, and we are powerless. We are nothing but his helpless victims. We are like Sean Hornbeck was within the house of the strong man who kidnapped him.

But Jesus comes to enter the house. Not as a champion, but as a victim Himself. He comes in to bind the strong man, yet not by overpowering Satan with His divine power, but by becoming the One accused in our place. Jesus binds the strong man by Himself being bound and nailed to a cross.

The Gospel for you, friends, is that God accuses His Son and not you. Those terrible things you said with your mouth...you did not say them; Jesus did, because He was accused by God in your place. Those shameful sins you committed...you did not commit them; Jesus did, because God accused Jesus for you.

Jesus overpowers the strong man. He defeats Satan within his very house, by entering that house to take your place as the Victim. That's why you are set free. Satan is bound by his own accusations. His words against you are powerless because Jesus took all the accusations out of the devil's mouth. "There is no one to condemn you," says Paul in Romans 8. Christ was accused and condemned for you. Your sins are forgiven. Your shameful deeds are washed away in the waters of your Baptism. The awful words that came out of your mouth are absolved and replaced by the holy body and blood of Christ which is placed into your mouth in His Supper.

Whatever sin the devil accuses you of, even the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, do not listen to him. Listen to Jesus. "I forgive you...there is no charge against you...your debt of sin has been paid in full; I paid it for you."

It is not by right that you stand here and worship before the holy God. It is by invitation. If you have no sin to confess, you have no invitation. But if you, like me, have sinned against God and your neighbor last week, then here is where God invites you. In Satan's house you are just a trophy on his shelf. Here in God's house you are brothers and sisters in Christ, recipients of His grace, sinners who are given forgiveness.

When Sean Hornbeck was found in the strong man's house and returned to his family, there was great joy. Here is your family - your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your family shares the joy of the Lord over you. For you, too, have been rescued out of the house of the strong man. Christ has delivered you. He has joy over you, and He is your joy. Amen.