

There is such a high as you make a break for the enemy's prize in a game of capture the flag. There's finally a flaw in their defenses and you decide to run. Or maybe you're just a very fast person and try to deke out everyone else on the other side. But you're there, sprinting towards the pylon with the flag or glowstick or bean bag on it and there rises in your chest a sense of victory which almost always crumbles into shouts of frustration as you feel a hand on your shoulder, someone coming in unseen from the front lines. Maybe that's just my experience, though I doubt it. You probably know what it is like to be sent to jail, waiting for a teammate to come to your rescue.

You're stuck there until a one of your allies risks their freedom to come and free you. They've got to avoid the fast runners, they've got to give up their own defence of your team's flag, and either way it could be costly for your team. But when they are successful, you get that free walk back. Running among the other team, untouchable, is literally liberating. So you turn right around and get yourself back into the action.

As Jesus was out on the field in today's reading, people had a strange read of the game He was playing. He was helping out the crowds in the entirety of Mark's Gospel up to this point, giving health back to a paralytic, a leper, one with a withered hand, and even to Peter's mother-in-law. He's cast out not just a few demons at this point, speaking with them face to face and calling them out of their victims and commanding them to be silent.

And yet the Pharisees have been questioning His religiosity and the scribes are now calling into question His power altogether. But they aren't questioning whether He has any power—that much is blatant to everyone present. They are instead questioning the source of His power, accusing Him of being possessed by or utilizing the power of Beelzebul, a fancy name for none other than Satan.

Which is akin to one capture the flag team putting their own guys into their own jail. Pretty soon the team will have no one left to defend their flag or capture the competitor's and it would be a quick game over, yet it would be no one's fault but their own.

So no, it is not by Beelzebul's power that He is casting out demons and healing the sick, but by the power of His own Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God that He has been proclaiming has come onto the scene and is winning victory over the kingdom of the evil one.

Jesus has come to fulfill what was promised in Eden at the beginning, the curse of God over the serpent finally coming to its completion, God destroying the devil that first tempted Adam and Eve bringing in sickness and shame and sorrow and death into the world so newly made.

And what a witness the works of Christ are to who He truly is and what He is truly doing. As He heals those with crippling illnesses, He is undoing to the decay that Adam and Eve's sin, first tempted by the evil one, brought into the world. When He forgives sins He is unravelling the cause of all this curse upon mankind. When He casts out demons He is demonstrating that He doesn't have simply power to work wonders, but He has ultimate power over the enemy.

What a great comfort to know that our God, the Triune God, the Father who is watching over us, the Son who took on flesh to dwell in this world, and the Spirit who dwells in us, this

God is able to command Satan and his host that they would not harm those who they once tormented. The fact that Jesus is capable of this means that, should we ever find ourselves in such a position, we are not hopeless but know the One who can come to our aide, who can hear our prayers and truly answer them.

And yet Jesus exorcizing the demons is not simply a comforting promise of His power; each act was not simply God meeting that specific need. It certainly was that, but it was indicative of what Christ was doing not just for one possessed person, but truly for all of humanity. Because even those who don't writhe on the floor at the name of Jesus, or begin speaking in Latin with eyes rolling like marbles whenever they enter a church, to people that look and act just like you and me, Christ has saved us from the devil just as much.

Christ entered into Satan's kingdom and, unlike in a game of capture the flag, He wasn't able to simply tag us from jail for a free walk back for the pair of us. No, He had to bind up the other team and render them helpless. And it cost Him. It was tiring and gruesome. And in a beautiful irony, Christ's final victory was when it appeared that the strong man had turned the tables and bound Him up. All seemed lost for Christ and those He came to save as He was bound to the cross, as He was crowned not with gold but with thorns, as He took His seat not on a majestic throne but was raised up by three nails and a tree, as He was arrayed not in a glorious robe but He was robed in naked humiliation.

But such a death, of such a man—the God-man to be exact—that was exactly what it took to bind up the one who had held the whole of God's creation hostage and tormented all those made in God's own image. After Good Friday came Easter when Christ arose, His enduring life proving Him the victor. He could at last exclaim that He was stealing back the plunder that the enemy had first stolen from Him. He was calling His treasure rightfully His once more. It may have cost Him more than gold or silver, demanding of Him in fact His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death; but what He earned was more than any stone or jewel—He had won back the crowning glory of creation, mankind remade in His image once more.

To attribute such redemptive work—either that of a single exorcism or all of Christ's redeeming life from conception to the cross to the empty tomb to His reign in the heavens—to give any of that glory to the devil, or to call it all evil, it would be ridiculous; it would be blasphemous against the Holy Spirit who empowered Christ (it's Christ's Spirit, One with Him and the Father, remember). To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is an awful sin, unforgivable according to Christ. But fear not, because if you believe in Christ, that means you cannot have blasphemed His Spirit—He would certainly have already left you!—but instead you continue to believe it and you confess it.

To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to deny Christ and His work, it's to be separated from the whole family of God, and quite earnestly it is to either be completely antagonistic to Christ and His work, or apathetic and completely disinterested in what He has done and has to say.

This warning of Christ is not to scare you into searching every second and every action just in case you've secretly or unknowingly committed it; rather it is to demonstrate the

severity of denying what Christ has done. Everything else can and will be forgiven. This alone will not receive grace.

And even for the people who seem to have maybe committed this in your life, just because it is called the unforgivable sin, don't cease to pray for them and love them, because you don't know if they've actually committed it, and we also don't know that Christ won't demonstrate grace and mercy even here. If they come to believe in Christ, that is all that matters, and then they will be in our family of believers with all the saints.

Now for you who feel like the devil still has sway, like you might still be locked under the staircase in the devil's kingdom, either because your health, physical or mental, just won't improve, or your relationships just cannot be civil and smooth, or certain temptations just won't quit or you don't have the determination to resist them and you find yourself stuck in the same cycles of sin. For those who believe that Christ has bound up the strong man and has robbed him of his hostages, but you still feel stuck, Paul talks about these trials that we experience, the groaning of a crumbling creation, these are slight momentary afflictions—not that they are trivial or unimportant, but they are simply incomparable to the eternal weight of glory that Christ has stolen you into. The things that are seen, your outer nature, it is still wasting away and that is painful and trying, but the unseen, the gifts of Christ, these are eternal and these are certain for you.

Christ, the Lord victorious over the strong man, our enemy, He has won you, He is holding you, and by His grace He will see you resurrected and living in life everlasting. He has won you and called you His own.

In His name,
Amen.