

FALSE FORCES

by Ray C. Stedman

We are beginning the third natural division of the first half of Mark's wonderful picture of the Servant who rules and the Ruler who serves. We have seen that the first division describes the authority of the servant -- the tremendous command Jesus exercised in many realms. The second division brought before us his knowledge of our humanity -- the penetrating, incisive understanding of man Jesus exhibited.

The third of these natural divisions extends from Chapter 3, Verse 7 to Chapter 6, Verse 6. Its theme is underscored by the emphasis on the crowds which followed Jesus. This is the period of high popularity in our Lord's ministry. You can see how it is introduced in the opening paragraph:

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed; also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon a great multitude, hearing all that he did, came to him. {Mark 3:7-8 RSV}

I think we have difficulty grasping the size of this crowd. This was not just a few people, or a few thousand. There were literally tens of thousands of people, undoubtedly, in this crowd. They came from all over this country -- from Galilee, from Judea, which began fifty miles to the south, from Jerusalem, the capital of Judea some seventy miles south of the Sea of Galilee, and beyond that from the land of Idumea, or Edom, way down in the southern desert, and from the region east of the Jordan River stretching out into the Arabian Desert, and from the west clear to the Mediterranean coast and up the coast to Tyre and Sidon, the area now in the country of Lebanon -- from throughout this entire area they came. They flocked out from all the cities to hear this amazing prophet who had risen in Galilee and was saying such startling things.

You can see how Mark traces the emphasis upon the crowd throughout this division. In Verse 20, he says, "and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat." Then in Verse 32, "a crowd was sitting about him; ..." And in Chapter 4, Verse 1: "Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, ..." And then, in Verse 36, Mark says, "And leaving the crowd," they went across to the other side of the lake. In Chapter 5, Verse 21: "And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him; ..." And in Verse 24: "And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him." So this is the period when Jesus is pressed by the great masses of people, the period of his greatest popularity.

For many, this has been the symbol of Jesus' success, as it would be for many in evaluating a person today. Anybody who can get a great crowd following him is regarded as a success. We have all kinds of people who do that. We call them "stars" -- there are star actors, star athletes, star singers, star politicians -- various people who have attained what in our day is a mark of success. No wonder the title of one of today's most popular musicals is Jesus Christ, Superstar. He is the one who drew all these great multitudes out from the cities of his day.

But as you read this account through, you see that Mark's intention is to underscore the weakness of popularity, the empty, hollow worthlessness of being popular, and how much damage and danger popularity produced in our Lord's ministry. There are six ways this is brought out in this division. We will take only the first of them in this study, from Chapter 3, Verse 7, to the end of the chapter. We will see three false and always hindering effects which are invariably produced when a movement becomes popular. They are a warning for us. Popularity produced them in the days of Jesus and popularity produces them today. We will see them now as we go through them.

The first is given to us in Verses 9-10. After describing the crowd Mark says:

And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they should crush him; for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him. {Mark 3:9-10 RSV}

This underscores certain unwanted and false emphases which were awakened by this crowd. They misunderstood the purpose for which Jesus came and they began to emphasize that which was secondary in his thinking. You see this all through the ministry of Jesus, especially with regard to the healing of physical bodies. Now, our Lord did heal physically -- there is no question about it. But, from that day to this, men have seized upon that as though it preeminently were the thing he came to do. Yet, as you read the Gospels carefully, you see that Jesus is very careful to play it down, and to emphasize that he came to heal the spirits of men and not their bodies. He healed their bodies in order to demonstrate what he could do, and would do, in the realm of the spirit -- for this is the way we are made. Human nature is such that what is going on internally must become externalized. It must show up in something which affects our bodies.

We well know that if we are anxious or troubled or upset it can result, if long continued, in certain physical defects. We can develop a nervous tic or twitch, or can get ulcers -- all kinds of things can go wrong because of some malady in our inner man.

Again, Jesus healed the body to demonstrate what he could do with the spirit. But the crowd misunderstood that, and they pressed around him so that he might touch those who were sick, and heal them -- so much so that our Lord had to resort to a stratagem to avoid being crushed, literally, by this crowd. That is how large it was.

The interesting thing is that the device he used to get away was perfectly human. Notice that Jesus didn't play with magic here. He didn't build an invisible barrier around himself so that nobody could get close, or suddenly step into a phone booth, change clothes and then leap into the sky. He is human. And, in order to escape, he asks his disciples to keep a boat handy on the shore so that he can step into it and move out onto the lake where the crowd can't follow him -- in order that he might preach instead of heal.

All they wanted was healing. He wanted to preach. This is one of the things popularity does. It invariably distorts a message and emphasizes something secondary, making it paramount in the eyes of the people, so that they miss the point.

The second false force popularity awakens is given in Verse 11:

And whenever the unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." And he strictly ordered them not to make him known. {Mark 3:11 RSV}

Behind these diseases, the Scriptures tell us, were oftentimes the presence and the power of unclean spirits. Have you noticed how many times in Scripture these demons are called "unclean"? In this day when we are seeing such an upsurge of demonic activity, we need to understand this, because it is one of the ways you can recognize the presence of a demon. It is unclean -- either morally or physically.

A friend told me of dealing years ago with a man who had an unclean spirit. As they talked in a hotel room in Portland, this man placed his hat on the bed. When he left, my friend found a ring of foul smelling grease where his hat had been. The odor pervaded the room for days -- evidence of the uncleanness of that spirit.

I remember talking with a girl who had fallen into the practice of using a Ouija board. It eventuated in her hearing voices that demanded she write things down before she could sleep at night. Invariably what she had to write was moral filth -- obscenities, ugly, evil words. Sometimes she would have to write pages of them before the voices would cease and she could sleep. That is a mark of the kind of spirits these were.

Mark tells us that when they saw Jesus they always identified him. They cried out, "You are the Son of God." And Jesus invariably silenced them and cast them out. Why do you suppose he rejected this testimony from these demonic entities? You remember that when Paul and Silas were in Philippi, a young girl followed them

and cried out something similar: "These men are servants of the most high God." They refused that witness. Paul finally cast the demon out. So, everywhere in the Scriptures, you find both the Lord and the apostles rejecting this kind of testimony. Yet it was true. He was the Son of God. But Jesus would not permit that witness to come from these demons. What was his reason for that?

Well, we can be sure of one thing -- these unclean spirits did not desire to advance the cause of Christ by their witness. They told the truth, but they did so because they knew it would hurt the cause of Jesus, not help it. They were out to mislead people about Christ. So something about the way they told this, though it was true, was nevertheless misleading, and that is what our Lord rejected.

Some commentators suggest that, because they were known to be "lying spirits," their testimony that Jesus was the Son of God would be construed as proof that he wasn't. In Mark Twain's fascinating book about his travels in the West and Hawaii, *Roughing It*, there is an account of a man who was a notorious liar, who was known in the community to be a spinner of tall tales. No one ever believed anything he said. One day they found him hanging dead, with a suicide note pinned on him, written in his own hand, and saying that he had taken his own life. But the coroner's jury pronounced it murder. They said that if the man himself said he had taken his own life, it was proof he hadn't!

But it is more likely that these demons intended that men would believe he was the son of the God whom they worshipped, i.e., Satan himself. When they said, "He is the Son of God," people would associate Jesus with demonic beings and with the devil himself. Therefore it is no accident that in just two more paragraphs you read of a delegation coming from Jerusalem who accuse Jesus of being possessed by a devil. That is why Jesus totally rejected this witness from the underworld that he was the Son of God.

The answer of our Lord to this threat is given in Verses 13-19:

And he went up into the hills, and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons: Simon whom he surnamed Peter; James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James, whom he surnamed Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder; Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. {Mark 3:13-19a RSV}

These are the twelve whom Jesus selected. It is evident in the contrast between this paragraph and the previous one that Mark wants us to understand that the witness Jesus wanted was not pretentious claims and impressive titles from demons, true as they might have been, but rather he wanted the witness of changed lives and empowered words, of men who had been with him and whose lives were different as a result, who were sent out to say what they had heard and learned, and who therefore had power to speak authoritatively -- even over the demons. This was the witness he chose. It is the witness he chooses yet today.

Notice that these twelve men were called to do three things:

They were called to ***a personal experience***, first -- to be with him. Jesus never wants anybody to talk about Christianity as an advocate, but always as a witness, i.e., telling of something which has happened to you. If you are merely a salesman on behalf of Christianity, holding it up to be a very fine approach to life or a great moral teaching, then you are an ineffective witness. The Lord doesn't want that. He wants a witness who has had something happen to him.

Then they were sent out ***for purposeful evangelism***. They were sent out to preach, to say what they had learned from him.

And they were given ***a powerful exorcism*** -- they were to cast out demons. That is, they were given something to say, they were sent out to say it, and they were given power over all the opposition.

It is extremely interesting that in order to reach the multitudes, our Lord selected only twelve men. That is the

way to do it. We often make a great mistake in our day by relying too heavily on mass media. We think we are going to reach the multitudes through all the great inventions which have come along -- radio, television, cassette tapes, etc. As helpful as they are, and rightful as they are in their place, nevertheless they will not take the place of men and women who have had a personal experience with Christ and who tell it but in whatever way they can -- perhaps even through some of these media -- and who have obvious power in their life to overcome the enemy and to stand against all opposition. This is the witness our Lord has chosen.

The twelve disciples are listed for us here and their names are familiar. Simon, James, and John are first, and they are all given special names by Jesus. He "surnamed" them, i.e. he chose other names for them. This marks them as belonging to an inner circle within the twelve. You remember how frequently we read after this that when Jesus went to do something special he took with him Peter and James and John. He dealt more intimately with these three than he did with any of the others. Thereby he designated them leaders of this group, the means by which the others would be reached, in that remarkable method which both the Lord and the apostles employed of reaching the few in order to reach the many.

Peter he called the "rock"; James and John he called the "sons of thunder." It is instructive to me that when he looked at this group of twelve men, what he saw as being needed in this band was a rock and two loud voices. Peter was the acknowledged leader of the twelve and was the one who ultimately proved to be the rock, the steady one to whom the others looked for leadership and upon whom they relied for guidance, while James was the first of the apostles to be martyred and John was the last, and in-between the apostolic witness was delivered. James left his mark by laying down his life first among the twelve, and John remained until the end to gather up all the apostolic witness, solidify it, and transmit it to us in its final expression in the Gospel of John, the letters of John, and the book of Revelation. So this was the leadership within the twelve, and our Lord dealt with them so that they might be the witness which ultimately would reach not only the multitudes there at hand, but, eventually, all the world. Jesus was content to work with these.

The third example of falseness arising out of popularity is given to us in Verses 20 and following:

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his friends heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said, "He is beside himself." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." {Mark 3:19b-22 RSV}

Here are two reactions to Jesus, to the intensity of his ministry. He gave himself so totally to this ministry to these crowds that he had no time even to eat. His friends heard about this and were disturbed. The word translated "friends" really means "relatives" -- literally, "those from beside him." We learn from the latter part of the chapter that it is actually his mother and his brothers. They are up in Nazareth and word reaches them that he is not taking care of himself. He is not eating properly. He is not sleeping properly. His health is threatened. So they leave Nazareth and come to try to put him under restraint. Their feeling is that he has gone crazy, that he is "beside himself" -- literally, "outside himself" -- as a result of his concern for the hurt of the world. Now, Jesus will handle that misapprehension at the end of this account.

But first he deals with the accusations of the scribes who came down from Jerusalem and who watched this same activity. Their explanation was, "He is possessed by the devil, by Beelzebub." Beelzebub means "lord of the house." It is a reference to Satan as king of the underworld, head of the demonic "Mafia," if you like. Beelzebub was the "godfather" who gave the orders, and the rest of the demons all followed. These scribes' explanation of the ministry of Jesus was that he was in league with them, that he had joined the Mafia and was casting out these demons by the power of the satanic godfather. Jesus answers with very simple logic:

And he called them to him, and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself [Remember, Beelzebub means the "lord of the house"], that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end." {Mark 3:23-26 RSV}

That is clear argument, isn't it? Satan, Jesus suggests, is clever and resourceful. He would never oppose

himself by using Jesus to cast out demons. That would create anarchy in the underworld. It would polarize his whole kingdom and create division and strife among his minions, and Satan would never permit that. He rules by fear. The Satanic kingdom knows nothing of love or loyalty. It is fear, abject terror, which controls it. Satan would never have permitted this kind of revolutionary activity within his kingdom. Jesus knows this and points it out to the scribes. And he says, "No, something else has happened." Then he describes what really is happening:

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house. {Mark 3:27 RSV}

This is what has happened. Jesus is the stronger man, and has entered the house of Satan and bound him. Today we frequently hear about people who go around "binding Satan." But I submit that this is totally unnecessary. There is only One who can bind the devil. And he has already done it. Jesus bound the devil even in the days of his ministry and thus made it possible for himself to cast out these unclean spirits and to plunder the house of Satan and release those he had held captive for so long -- humanity. This is the explanation of what has happened. So today we don't need to go about binding the devil. We may properly exercise the authority to cast out evil spirits. But it is because the devil is already bound that we have that possibility at all. And it is only One who has made that possible -- the Lord Jesus himself.

Having answered that claim, he now moves on to issue a very severe warning to these scribes:

"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" -- for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." {Mark 3:28-31 RSV}

Many have been very frightened by that paragraph, and rightly so. It is a serious word that Jesus uttered. Some have concluded from it that the unpardonable sin is suggesting that Jesus had an unclean spirit, or that the works of God are really the works of the devil. But it is important to notice certain things about this account. Notice that these men had not yet committed the unpardonable sin when they said Jesus had an unclean spirit. Otherwise Jesus would never have warned them. By his own words, there is no use warning a man who has committed the unpardonable sin; he is beyond help. He cannot be forgiven. So, if that is what these men had done, there would have been no point to his warning.

But he did warn them, so it is clear that they had not yet committed it. But they are on the verge of it. They are close to it. "You are very close to committing that sin," Jesus says, "when you ascribe the work of God to the devil." That is very close. What Jesus warned them against was rejecting the witness of the Holy Spirit. And to whom does the Spirit witness? Well, all through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit is given to witness to the Lord Jesus. "He has come to bear witness to me" {cf, John 15:26}, Jesus said later on to his disciples, "and he will take of the things of mine and make them known unto you," {cf, John 16:14}. He came into the world "to convict men of sin," {cf, John 16:8}; "because they believe not on me," {John 16:9}. All the work of the Holy Spirit is designed to exalt and declare and define the work of Jesus. So to reject the Holy Spirit, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, is to reject the Spirit's witness of Christ.

That is what these men were close to doing. And it is true, therefore, that if in the ultimate there is a rejection of Christ, then there is no hope, because there is no ground of forgiveness other than faith in the Lord Jesus. Men are forgiven when they believe in his name -- and on no other basis. If that is set aside; ultimately and finally -- this is not a single act of rejection which is in view, it is a process -- if the heart is resistant and rejects the claims of Jesus as set forth by the Holy Spirit, the result is that there can be no forgiveness. This is Scripture's sharp way of underscoring the fact which Jesus himself declared "No man comes unto the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6}.

Having said this, our Lord deals with the misunderstanding of his relatives:

And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your

brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers? " And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." {Mark 3:31-35 RSV}

When word was brought in that Jesus' mother and brothers were outside, everybody expected him immediately to go out and see them. But Jesus didn't -- deliberately. Instead he looked around and said these strange words: "Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Everyone who does the will of God is closer to me than they." Was he beside himself because he seemingly neglected his family and neglected himself? No, he was simply possessed, and held, by a stronger tie. Dearer even than his own earthly family were those who were his brothers and sisters and his mother in the family of God. Thus he makes clear that there is a primacy of relationship in which those ties that bind us to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to the Lord Jesus and to God our Father, are stronger and make more imperious demands upon us than those of our own natural family.

I want to say a word of caution about an idea which is being circulated widely these days. I don't want to attack it, particularly, because there is much truth in it. But I want to raise a warning which grows out of this incident in our Lord's experience. There is a teaching abroad which says that a Christian is bound by the authority of his father and mother almost throughout his life. It is called by several names, like the "Chain of Command," or the "Chain of Counsel." Now, there is a great deal of truth in it, because it recognizes relationships which are important -- especially as children are growing up. And respect and honor are always to be given to those who are our kin by natural ties. Our Lord Jesus never instructed a person to ignore his responsibilities to his natural kin -- never! In fact, the Scriptures make clear that, as Paul puts it, "a man who doesn't care for his own is worse than an infidel," {cf, 1 Tim 5:8}. Jesus pointed out how wrong the Pharisees were in using the Law to evade their responsibilities to their parents.

But what our Lord does point out very clearly here is that when there is a conflict between what God says, the demands of God in our life, and the advice and counsel of our relatives according to the flesh, it is the Word of God which has primacy. It must be the deciding factor in our life. And though we are responsible to declare our decision with love and compassion and understanding, we must follow what God says. This is why Jesus said clearly and repeatedly, "If a man forsakes not his father and his mother, and his wife and his children, and himself, and even all that he has, he cannot be my disciple," {cf, Luke 14:26}. He makes that supreme claim upon us, having fulfilled it himself. And this is why on fairly numerous occasions he himself seems to ignore his ties with his mother and his brothers and sisters -- in order that he might be faithful to the calling of God.

One of the worst things that can happen to us, as this account makes clear, is to become caught up in a popular movement. False forces arise out of it. That is the whole thrust of this section. Misemphases easily spring into being and wrongful attitudes arise readily in a popular movement. Popularity, therefore, ought to be watched very carefully. And when a movement is popular, as Christianity is popular in many places today, we must be very careful that we are listening to the voice and the Spirit of God.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the truth as it is in Jesus. Help us to be wise and loving and faithful and loyal in all our relationships, Lord. And give us the freedom to be your men and women above all else. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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