

Jesus and the Devil

Matthew 12:22-32

I'll never forget a friend telling me once, "I don't believe in the Devil." He was a professed Christian, and I never fully understand his objection, but he simply could not accept the idea of a single person as the head of all the evil spirits. Perhaps it was the idea of the inherent goodness of man that made the thought of an evil creature somehow contradictory, but whatever the reason, for him, there was no devil in existence. His view was naive, at the very least. And dangerous, even spiritually deadly, at worst. Denying the existence of the devil seems to be inseparable with a denial of Jesus himself.

Other people, I fear, give the devil too much credit, living out their lives in the unceasing fear that the devil would somehow get them, inevitably, inescapably. They live with constant fear, bordering on paranoia, even becoming irrational or compulsive in their quest for life's happiness and peace, a pursuit that is doomed to failure because of their fear of the Devil. They never seem to find that peace, for the great fear of the Devil keeps them from any sense of freedom, any sense of safety or security at all. And their greatest fear is that of being impotent, powerless, in the presence of the Devil's superior power and position in the world.

Like so many things, both of those extreme topics are wrong, and the truth lies somewhere in between, and that is where we will begin to focus this evening. Beginning with,

I. THE PERSONAL REALITY OF THE DEVIL.

Just notice what is obvious here. There was a demon possessed man who came to Jesus.

v.22

Just a few bare facts are given to us, as if it were just another ordinary day at the office for Jesus. But don't miss the obvious power and influence of the demons in the life of this man, causing him to being unable to see or speak. And Jesus healed him, much to the amazement of the people, who thought perhaps this Jesus was the son of David, according to verse 23. Perhaps Jesus was the anticipated descendant of David who would sit on David's throne and rule over God's kingdom of Israel again, in power and authority. That's what they hoped for anyway, in their own mistaken understanding of a prominent Old Testament promise as they witnessed Jesus demonstrating his power. The whole scene makes you recognize the power of the Devil, whom Jesus cast out of this man.

So let me begin with that note, the identification of the demons. With this brief explanation,

A. Demons are fallen angels.

They are spirits, spiritual creatures. Created at some time during those first six days of creation. Created very good. All of creation was very good. Everything that God made was very good. And angels were part of that creation, ministering spirits we read later in the Bible. Spiritual creatures, existing as created beings, but without a body. Without flesh and blood. Without a physical existence. But real creatures. Not ghosts, in the popular sense of that word, something unreal or imaginary. But real. Angels are real. They live and exist in the heavenly realm, in the presence of God. And they live and exist in and around the earth. They live with us, again as ministering spirits.

We don't know when they fell, or how. But this we do know,

Jude 6 "And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; 7 as Sodom

and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

So they are moral creatures, and those who fell will come under the eternal judgment of God. Similarly,

2 Peter 2:4 “For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; 6 and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly.”

Scripture makes known to us a single fallen angel as head of them all, sometimes identified as Satan or the Devil. Paul identifies him more explicitly as “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” And that head angel is what is in the mind of the Pharisees, whom they identified by the name Beelzebub, “the ruler of the demons.”

v.24

Jesus certainly doesn’t deny the reality of Beelzebub, but rather makes mention of the Devil’s kingdom. For,

B. Demons are ministers of Satan’s kingdom.

v.25-26

His purpose, of course, was to make his point with something of a logical force for emphasis,

v.27

In other words, Jesus responded to that blasphemous accusation against him with a rational and logically sound argument. He wasn’t acting in the name of Beelzebub, because he was acting against the power and influence of Beelzebub. He was fighting a very real kingdom of evil. And if “Satan casts out Satan,” then his kingdom is doomed. It cannot stand.

But then he acknowledges the power that others had as well, “by whom do your sons cast them out?” The Pharisees were trapped by their own foolishness, and as Jesus puts it, their own people would be their own judges, so great and obvious is their hypocrisy. They stood self-condemned.

Then Jesus went on, for he has something to teach. Something very profound and provocative. It wasn’t enough to mention and acknowledge Satan’s kingdom. Jesus took the occasion to announce and declare his own kingdom! And he does so by mention of the Holy Spirit.

In a real sense, we might call Satan the Evil Spirit. His counterpart, as head of the spiritual world who remained unfallen, was the Holy Spirit. Of course, as we know from the rest of the Bible, the Holy Spirit far exceeds and excels above Satan, for he is the third person of the Trinity, an eternal person in the godhead who is equal in power and glory with the Father and the Son. But just as the Evil Spirit, the prince of demons, is personally identified, so is the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes known,

II. THE PERSONAL REALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

v.28

It wasn’t in the name of Beelzebub that Jesus cast out demons. It wasn’t by the power of Beelzebub at all. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice by that emphasis that,

A. The power of the Holy Spirit is superior to demons.

Jesus says, “I cast out demons by the Spirit of God.” That’s what this is all about. A spiritual battle. One in which the Holy Spirit is the most powerful Spirit.

God and Satan are not equal in power. They are not on the same level in terms of authority, engaged in a mortal battle for supremacy. God the Holy Spirit already has supremacy! Do you remember the story of the pigs in,

Mat. 8:28 “When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. 29 And suddenly they cried out, saying, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” 30 Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. 31 So the demons begged Him, saying, “If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine.” 32 And He said to them, “Go.” So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. 33 Then those who kept them fled; and they went away into the city and told everything, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. 34 And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region.”

Whose in charge? Who has the superior power? Jesus, of course. And the demons, so powerful in their possession of these two men, had no such power when confronted by Jesus. They knew of their own doom, “What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?”

That’s encouraging to us, isn’t it? The power of the Holy Spirit is superior! So we read,

1 John 4:3 “...and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. 4 You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

James 4:7 “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

It can be done. You have the strength, in the person of the Holy Spirit, for by that same Spirit, Jesus has cast out demons. John goes so far as to put it this way,

1 John 3:8 “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”

There was a reason for the frequency of demonic possession during Jesus’ day, namely the intensity of the battle between Jesus and Satan came to its head. Jesus came to confront Satan, called the ruler of this world. He came to confront him, and to defeat him. Thus, in John’s gospel we read,

John 12:31 “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. 32 And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.”

Jesus came to save his people, and in doing so, he came to bring judgment upon the Devil. That was never more obvious than when he freed someone from demon possession. Judgment time. And even more so, we can identify that as the coming of Jesus’ kingdom. Indeed,

B. The power of the Holy Spirit is the definitive evidence of the presence of Jesus' kingdom.

These exorcisms, if you want to call them that, were the evidence of the presence of the kingdom; the inauguration of the kingdom. That's what Jesus says so plainly in, v.28

In other words, "the kingdom of God has come..." Jesus has inaugurated his kingdom, on earth, by his own presence and by the power of the Holy Spirit which he exhibited. So the ruler of this world is cast out!

Isn't that a glorious thought!

John 16:7 "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. 8 And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: 9 of sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; 11 of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged."

A few more cross references to make this point clearly.

Heb. 2:14 "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil."

Col. 2:15 "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it."

And in the cross reference to our text in,

Luke 11:20 "But if I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you."

That's the point. The kingdom of God has come. The power of the Holy Spirit to cast out demons is definitive proof. And to be sure we understand, Jesus gives us an illustration. First, again in Luke's cross reference,

Luke 11:21 "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace. 22 But when a stronger than he comes upon him and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils."

Our text this afternoon,

Mat. 12:29 "Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house."

So here's the picture. Jesus is the robber, the thief. Not armed robbery, but what is often called strong arm robbery. The use of force, power, to steal. Specifically, tying up the homeowner first. Tying up the strong man. In the illustration, that's Jesus, the one who is tying up the strong man. And the strong man is the Devil. So if this whole world is the Devil's home, Jesus breaks in, ties up the strong man, and makes off with his booty. He plunders the strong man's home. In other words, he redeems and rescues the elect! He brings salvation to the whole world. That's what it means to say that the kingdom of Jesus has already come.

Now, let me give you a bonus thought, from the book of Revelation. The binding of Satan. I believe that Satan is bound now, in this sense that I have been describing. The strong arm robbery of Satan's kingdom, the casting out of demons, the triumph of Jesus over the Devil noted at the cross. So here is John's description of that state of affairs,

Rev. 20:1 "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand."

2 He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; 3 and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.”

You see, the nations now belong to Jesus. Satan is bound, no longer the ruler of this world. The thousand years is now, the whole of this age.

v.28 “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Thus, Jesus gives a warning.

III. A PERSONAL WARNING.

v.30

And in that context, the familiar warning about the unforgivable sin,

v.31-32

We will get to that in a moment, but first, the warning begins with,

A. A call to commitment to Jesus.

Again, v.30

There are only two options, and neutrality is not one of them. Choosing the middle ground is not one of the options. In this kingdom context, in the discussion of the triumph of Jesus over the power of the Devil, you have to choose sides. You will choose sides, and if you don't choose the kingdom of Jesus, your position

will default to Satan's kingdom. “He who is not with me is against me...”

So let me be sure to challenge you with that commitment. Whose side are you on? More specifically, are you with Jesus in the declaration and work of his kingdom? Are you gathering for him, for the building and extension of his kingdom? If you are not, then you are scattering! It's one or the other.

And that is the context for the severe warning regarding the unforgivable sin. The point is, that there are two kingdoms in conflict with each other, and Jesus wins. Jesus' kingdom has come, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and if you are willing to deny that, if you are obstinate and rebellious in your willingness to deny the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the glorious kingdom of Jesus, if you deny that the power of the Holy Spirit is at work, then you are, indeed, committing the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Thus,

B. A warning against heinous sin.

31-32

Now, I am very familiar with people who have sensitive consciences and fear that, perhaps, they have committed this sin. There are people, Christians, who fear that perhaps, unwittingly even, they might have crossed this line from which there is not return. They fear, perhaps, that they have committed this unforgivable sin and will not, therefore, ever be forgiven.

Let me give a short and easy answer to that dilemma first, then a more detailed exposition. The simple answer is that if you confess your sin and repent, seeking God's forgiveness, you have not committed the unforgivable sin. For the Scripture explicitly tells us that,

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

So whatever this verse means, it cannot mean that there is some sin that can commit that will not be forgiven, even if you repent. There is no repentant believer whom God turns away because they crossed some sort of line, because they committed some particularly awful sin. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...” So those who commit this unforgivable sin will not be the ones repenting!

But more to the point, what is it? What is the unforgivable sin? I believe the context makes the answer to that question clear. It is the rejection of Jesus’ kingdom, established by the power of the Holy Spirit. The unforgivable sin is a denial of Jesus’ kingdom power, made evident in the world by the Holy Spirit. It is a deliberate, willful, hardening sin in which you reject the invitation of Jesus’ kingdom and, instead, make yourself at home in the kingdom of the ruler of this world. In other words, you join Satan’s kingdom.

Rather than being with Jesus, you are against him. And there is a great warning to those who would be in that position. There is great warning to those who would consistently and persistently oppose the Kingdom of Jesus. From one perspective, you will be hardened in your sin. You will be entrapped and enslaved by your sin. You will remain dead in your sin. And you will not be forgiven.

v.31 “...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.”

With eternal consequences,
v.32

More to the point for us here today, take encouragement from all of this in your own struggle with sin, as you battle against the prince of this world. He is a defeated enemy, to be sure, but still a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He is bound, but in the sense of being on a leash, so if you resist him he will flee from you.

But if you don’t resist him, if you don’t wage war against him, he still seeks to wreak havoc in your life. So take courage, knowing that the kingdom of God has come upon you by the power of the Holy Spirit. And then, in that power, go out and face the spiritual battles that he would still bring to you. Thus I could think of no better conclusion than,

Eph. 6:10 “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”