

## **Luke 11:14-23** **Choosing Sides**

This is an entertaining time of year. Many people, all around the western world are making up their minds to lose weight, exercise more, read more, drink less, be nicer to their sisters and brothers, read through the Bible, give more money to the church, and in general reform their lives. All too often, within a week or so these promises are, if not forgotten, at least reconciled to that category of unfulfilled promises of the years before. But I am not opposed to New Year's Resolutions. There is nothing wrong with making up your mind to improve yourself, whether it be physically, intellectually, or spiritually. After all, when confronted with captivity among the heathen Babylonians, "Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8).

Perhaps the challenge with keeping resolutions is that old habits are hard to break. Perhaps it is a lack of discipline. But also I think it is because we live in an age where absolutes are seen less clearly than before. We live in a postmodern age and, as a result, the idea of even needing to reform is not seen as valuable as it once was. By that I mean, that we usually change because we think we need to be closer to some idea of perfection than we are. But if there is no idea of perfection, or better still, if that idea of perfection can be manipulated and contorted to be what we want it to be, even what we already are, then where is the need to change.

Scripture teaches us differently. Scripture teaches that there are absolutes. There are ideas that simply are, whether we like them to be or not. And the question then becomes not whether we can conform the truth to ourselves, but whether we can conform ourselves to the truth. And Scripture also teaches that there can be no neutrality on these matters. One cannot abstain from making a decision. Not to choose is a choice.

There is some debate about the occasion of this particular event. Many think this is the same event related by Matthew and Mark in their accounts of the life of Christ. In Matthew's narrative it is reported that the man lost not only speech but of sight, and Mark inform us that the man was deaf as well as mute. These are details a physician like Luke would not have overlooked. Also, Luke does not identify those who challenged Jesus, but Matthew refers to them as Pharisees and Mark as scribes. But perhaps most importantly, both Matthew and Mark have the event taking place during the Galilean ministry of Jesus, whereas Luke sets the story nearer the end of His life in Judea, so it seems more likely that this is a different event. That, however, is detail. The similarity in each case, and the point of the commentary, is that the work of Jesus is ascribed to Satan.

### **The Accusation**

Jesus began by "casting out a demon" (v. 14). This ought to have provoked no surprise, since He had done this same thing many times before, <sup>33</sup>in the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, <sup>34</sup>"Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" <sup>35</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" (Luke 4:33-35) to cite but one example.

Luke writes, that “it was mute; when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke” (v. 14). It seems that this was not that the demon itself could not speak, but that such was the effect on the wretched man it possessed. There is no end to the ways in which Satan seeks to hurt man. Do we think that because there is little active demon possession today, Satan is not at work? He still has his ways of rendering believers speechless. Through peer pressure, lack of faith, fear of rejection, or just plain laziness, Satan persuades believers to remain silent about the kingdom of God. By convincing man that his prayers are useless, ineffective, and of no influence, Satan quiets the tongue of God’s chosen. By making worship seem routine and ritualistic, or using our vanity to make us self-conscious, Satan chokes our praise of God in His very house. There is no doubt that many saints of God today are influenced by Satan to remain mute.

What good do we speak of the kingdom of God? It is not enough that we simply not curse others. It is not enough that we don’t lie and resort to inappropriate humor. These things are to be far from our lips, of course, but the commands of Scripture are positive as well as negative. That is, there are not only things to avoid, but things to do. We are to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4), “let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment” (Ephesians 4:29), and “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

As was too often the case, whoever the people were, “the crowds were amazed” (v. 14). Sadly, as we have seen, amazement was not a synonym for faith. So much so that, in this case, “some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons’” (v. 15).

It was to possible to deny that the miracles performed by Jesus actually happened. People had been healed, publically and completely, People had been freed from demon possession in the midst of great crowds. Thousands had been fed. People had been raised from the dead and restored to their families. That Jesus did great and miraculous works was undeniable. Therefore, the strategy resorted to by those who refused to believe was to attribute these miracles to a demonic power, as “some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons’” (v. 15).

Beelzebul was a god associated with the Philistine city of Ekron. He is introduced to us in an account of the king Ahaziah. “Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber which was in Samaria, and became ill. So he sent messengers and said to them, ‘go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I will recover from this sickness’” (2 Kings 1:2). This brought Ahaziah into conflict with Elijah who informed the king that because he had relied upon foreign gods rather than the God of Israel, he would die (2 Kings 1:4). That the two names are spelled differently can be either change over time, or a different pronunciation based on a different local dialect. The name, in either case, means “lord of the dwelling” and had come, by the time of Jesus, to be a synonym for Satan, himself, since he is referred to here as “the ruler of the demons’ (v. 15).

This was as extreme an accusation as could be made. To ascribe to the Son of God the work of Satan is a contrast too great to be exaggerated. He Who was most perfect was accused to be most vile. He Who was most pure was called the most sinful.

To ascribed the power of conquest to Satan was, and remained, a frequent strategy of the Jews, as the early Church grew in numbers and spread in influence. The Jews even used the fact that Jesus died on the cross as evidence that God had rejected Him, “<sup>41</sup>in the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, <sup>42</sup>‘He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. <sup>43</sup>He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” (Matthew 27:43).

In the first century, Jews who converted to Christianity were referred to by Jewish religious leaders as *minim*. The most profound Jewish prayer at this time was a prayer called the *Shemoneh Esrei*. This prayer had been composed by one hundred twenty Jewish religious leaders, known as the Great Men of the Assembly, in the 5th century BC. It was to be recited three times each day and contained eighteen blessings (the name of the prayer comes from the Jewish word for eighteen). This greatest of Hebrew prayers was modified near the end of the first century to include the *Birkat HaMinim* or curse against heretics which read as follows:

“And for slanderers let there be no hope, and may all the evil in an instant be destroyed and all Your enemies be cut down swiftly; and the evil ones uproot and break and destroy and humble soon in our days. Blessed are You, Lord, who breaks down enemies and humbles sinners.”

If any priest unknowingly skipped one or two of the blessings in the prayer they were forgiven, but if he skipped this particular petition, he forfeited his position. Thus the accusation of second century church father Justin Martyr, “in your synagogues you curse those who believe in Christ.”

Such an accusation was made because the difference between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders was self-evident. He was humble “but I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27) they were self-righteous, “the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’” (Luke 5:30). He was genuine “but the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish - the very works that I do - testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36), they were hypocrites “<sup>3</sup>therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. <sup>4</sup>They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. <sup>5</sup>But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments” (Matthew 23:3-5). He was compassionate “when the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘do not weep’” (Luke 7:13), they were cruel “but woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matthew 23:13).

A lesson to learn is that there is great prejudice among unbelievers against the things of God. People will always believe the worst about us. Whatever we do is wrong and whatever we say is false. If we do good, it must be from selfish motives. If we speak truth, we must have a hidden agenda. If Jesus casts out demons, He must do so through Satan. Like Paul we must pray “that we will be rescued from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith” (2 Thessalonians 3:2).

The accusations continued when “others, to test Him, were demanding of Him a sign from heaven” (v. 16). As if expelling demons was not sign enough! Jesus had spent nearly three years now performing

miracles. Most of these were done publically. He had healed the sick, created food, shown power over nature, and raised the dead. There had been signs enough, and in a few moments He would eventually say as much, “this generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah” (Luke 11:29).

### **The Answer**

Reminding us of His deity, Luke acknowledges that Jesus “knew their thoughts” (v. 17). As God, Jesus had every right to respond with wrath. How offended He must have been! Yet, once again demonstrating His love, mercy, and compassion Jesus reached out to them. He refuted their accusation by pointing out its fallacy in three areas. First their accusation was illogical. It was obvious that “any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls” (v. 17). In this, He demonstrated the poor reasoning of his accusers. It was obvious that “if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand” (v. 18). There might be instances of Satan willingly allowing his kingdom to suffer a momentary setback to fulfill a greater destructive purpose, but it is impossible to think that Satan would allow the extraordinary and pervasive power of Jesus to go on unabated if he could do anything about it.

Secondly, Jesus challenged the consistency of their argument, stating that “if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?” (v. 19). In this line of reasoning, Jesus stipulated to their accusation. That is, He allowed them to presume that His work is the work of Satan. But that only begs another question. If Jesus cast out demons by Satan’s power, what about others who cast out demons? From whence did their power come?

The Jewish leaders naturally assumed that their power over Satan was real and genuine. That they may have had genuine success in this is possible, again thinking that Satan might allow a temporary defeat for a greater victory. But Scripture has accounts of Jewish exorcists failing in their endeavors.

“<sup>13</sup>But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.’ <sup>14</sup>Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. <sup>15</sup>And the evil spirit answered and said to them, ‘I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’ <sup>16</sup>And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (Acts 19:13-16).

Jesus demonstrated the hypocrisy of their accusation. How could they insist that the never failing effectiveness of Jesus casting out demons was by Satan’s power but yet their own leaders inconsistent and sporadic effectiveness in doing the same thing was by the power of God?

Finally, Jesus pointed out that “if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (v. 20). This challenged the integrity of the accusers. Would they accept the truth that was before them? Would they acknowledge the power of God?

It was clear, Jesus said, that “if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (v. 20). This was a metaphor that resonated with the Jewish leaders. In another case where the powers of God and the powers of Satan were on display, Moses had duelled with Pharaoh’s magicians. They had each taken turns performing wondrous acts, but finally unable to replicate the

miracles Moses did, the court magicians admitted defeat and “said to Pharaoh, ‘this is the finger of God’” (Exodus 8:19) But like Pharaoh the Jewish leaders’ hearts were “hardened, and he did not listen to them” (Exodus 8:19).

By not acknowledging the truth, they acknowledged their own spiritual deadness. Though they claimed to be righteous in and of themselves, they did not recognize the kingdom of God when it was in their presence. So spiritually blind were they, that they mistook the work of God for the work of Satan.

### **The Choice**

To emphasize His refutation, Jesus continued, “<sup>21</sup>when a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are undisturbed. <sup>22</sup>But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder” (v. 21-22).

The stronger one is Jesus, Himself. As John the Baptist testified, “<sup>16</sup>John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire’” (Luke 3:16-17). It was for the purpose of destroying the works of Satan that Jesus came, “the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

Jesus, having conquered distributes the spoils, that is He restores to a right relationship with God those whom the Father has given Him, “<sup>28</sup>I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. <sup>29</sup>My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).

Though it might not always seem so, we must remember that Satan is powerless against God. He possess only what God allows him. His power extends only as far as God permits. But we must also remember that it is impossible to be neutral in the struggle between Christ and Satan. Jesus concluded, “he who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters” (v. 23). It was a point Jesus had emphasized before. “<sup>49</sup>John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us.’ <sup>50</sup>But Jesus said to him, ‘do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you’” (Luke 9:49-50).

But we must remark on the great problem of religious divisions over insignificant things. Make no mistake, there are things about which a true believer cannot compromise. False doctrine must be refuted at every turn. Sinful practice must be called what it is without fear of political correctness. But to get lost disputing things that are not of eternal significance (ceremonies, style, etc.) not only sullies the Christian testimony to the world, but distracts believers from their vigilance in keeping watch for true error. We must be humble. We must be well acquainted with the Bible, and we must be able to distinguish things which matter from things which do not. If the music is not what you would prefer, or the preacher’s style of dress is not what you expect, or the room decor is too much or too little, that is not worth the trouble, Yet, like Paul let us say that of anyone “should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8). Each of us has a choice to make. Each

of us must decide, every day, every hour whether or not to serve God. Passivity and indecision will never do. We must choose.

**Take Aways**

May God grant us the faith to resolve to live a life that reflects our choice as sons and daughters of the Most High God.