



## **Lord, Teach Us to Pray: P.S. What About Evil?**

Luke 11:14-28

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Last week we finished our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer, but this week we add a postscript, for there is one more aspect of prayer that needs to be discussed. Turn with me to Luke 11:14-28.

Well, for many in our society, it's another Super Hero summer. As Hollywood execs have tried to figure out the box office formula for making big bucks, it seems they've decided that super heroes bring in the cash. They've milked the Superman, Spiderman, and X-Men franchises for quite a bit...now we've got Iron Man blazing up the screen. The Incredible Hulk debuts later this week, and we'll get yet another Batman movie, the sixth one, in July. So...why super heroes? What is it about these characters that many American people fall in love with? Is it about the extraordinary imbedded in the ordinary? Is it about escaping from the daily grind? Or is it about watching a fantastic world where someone with superhuman powers puts evil in its place by sheer strength and restores the reign of good over evil? I don't know for sure—it's probably a bit of all these things—but at least for now Hollywood thinks they have figured out how to fill a few theater seats.

### **STRENGTH**

All of which brings us to our passage today. In Luke 11:14-28 the interaction we witness is all about strength—not the fantasy of the silver screen, but the power of the spirit. This is kingdom strength - strength to overcome the unrelenting determination of evil to wreak havoc throughout creation. Strength that embodies God's promise to never leave or forsake us. Here we witness the drama facing the human will when faced with spiritual choices. As Jesus' opponents challenge his authority to cast out demons and accuse him of being in league with the devil, Jesus responds forcefully as one who knows what is at stake. In the middle of his discourse, Jesus tells a parable, and that's where I want to start this morning, vs. 21 and 22. We'll work our way out from there. It's a simple parable, a story about strength.

A strong man stands safe and secure in his house, or rather his castle. He is fully armed, his property is fully guarded, and all that he owns is safe from outsiders. But in a surprise move someone stronger arrives, attacks and overpowers his fortress, overcoming the owner's trustworthy defenses. He takes charge of the property—dividing the plunder. A strong man and a stronger man. Who is who in this parable? And who are we?

Many times in our lives we don't feel we are strong enough to make it to the next day. We feel trapped by sorrow, discouragement, an addiction that has a tight grip on us, a physical illness that is debilitating.

And on other days, we couldn't feel stronger—we passed a test, we reconciled with a friend, we reached a goal we have been working toward for a long time. We receive a clean bill of health from our doctor.

So our strength comes and goes—some days we are weak and other days we feel invulnerable. But who is the strong man in this parable who appears to have complete control over his castle? Our clue comes at the beginning of this narrative (vs. 14). Remember how it starts?

*Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed.*

Jesus releases a man from the demon that has held him captive. As the man is freed from his captor, he (who was mute), speaks, and the one who had imprisoned him is overthrown. A stronger man has overcome the strong man. Jesus has set the man free from the evil that bound him. Satan is the strong man. But Jesus is stronger still.

And who are we in this parable? The castle represents our lives. Evil lays its claim on us and weakens us, holding us captive. But the hand of God rescues us and sets us free. God is much stronger than Satan and the evil in this world. Two weeks ago we prayed “deliver us from the evil one”—this is a picture of that prayer at work. Jesus has rescued this captive.

## **DIVISION**

Now we need to back up and ask, “What prompted Jesus to tell this parable?” Why this story here? The reality is that although most of the crowd responds to Jesus’ exorcism with amazement and awe, not everyone sees it that way. Some accuse him of being the devil’s agent. “You may be strong, Jesus, but your strength must come from the power of evil, from Beelzebub (another name for Satan).” A ridiculous claim, remarks Jesus. If Satan is commanding his ranks to obliterate each another, then evil will eventually cave in on itself, wiping itself out.

We are familiar with Jesus’ words in verse 17: “A house divided against itself will fall,” apparently a common phrase that was circulating in his culture as well. Abraham Lincoln used this quote referring to the plight of the country during the Civil War. If a unified entity begins to fight within its ranks, that army will not last long. It will crumble; it will give up its power; it will fail.

But Satan, Jesus says, is not divided. He would never weaken himself in that way. Satan is alive and well, commanding his evil forces to bind and enslave the hearts of humanity. Satan is strong! So Jesus tells the parable to illustrate the unsurpassed strength of God.

Jesus is also clear that we are either with him, or on the side of evil—in this instance it is all or nothing. There is no middle ground. Vs. 23: *He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.*

A few weeks ago, Jim talked about the Greek word for devil, which literally means “to split apart.” Satan’s work is to divide. And what are the end results of such division? Ruin, destruction, a shattering of wholeness, enslavement and deception. The demon at the beginning of the passage today had split a man from his voice. Likewise, throughout Luke we see the devastating effects of evil on the lives of many—we witnessed a boy in chapter 9 who was seized by a demon who threw him down and caused him to convulse. Or, what about the demon-possessed man in chapter 4, who raged through the temple crying out? And there was Legion in chapter 8—a man who lived among the tombs (split off from his family and friends) because everybody feared him. Jesus himself is confronted by Satan, who attempts to separate the son from the Father with temptation. No, there is no division within Satan’s ranks. Rather his mission is to divide. In contrast, the work of Jesus is to gather, to pull together the lost...to take what has been split apart and restore it to wholeness.

## **SPIRIT**

Luke begins and ends this passage with pictures of two people who encounter two very different spirits. As Luke records stories of people possessed by evil spirits, so he also writes a great deal about the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of others—namely Mary, Jesus’ mother; Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist; Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife; John the Baptist and Simeon, on whom the Holy Spirit rests. All of these people are listening for God’s voice and participating in what God is doing in the world. They are a part of the healing Kingdom of God. Jesus himself comes in the power of the Holy Spirit as he begins to preach, heal and cast out demons. So it isn’t hard to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit on the man in the opening of this passage...he is restored, freed, released.

But what about this evil or unclean spirit who goes out of a man seeking a place of rest? Look at verse 24. I’ve always thought this is an odd story. Why would an evil spirit leave a person? What does a place of rest look like for a demon? I had no idea demons needed rest. Apparently, the demon thinks he can find a better place to live...so he checks out of his hotel and begins to wander. But he can’t seem to find another suit-

able abode, so he returns to the one he left—only to find that the innkeeper has vacuumed, made the bed, and cleaned the room up. It has once again become a very desirable place to live, because it is a place that can be destroyed. John Calvin writes that “to Satan no sight is beautiful but deformity itself, and no smell is sweet but filth and nastiness.”

The cleaned up man is so inviting, that the demon throws a party for seven other friends, and they all show up to ravage the place. Without a way to keep the evil from re-entering his life, the man is still vulnerable to the demon.

The contrast is clear...who would you rather have residing in your house? The Holy Spirit who redeems and restores and releases? Or the evil one who destroys and divides and deforms? Thus, Jesus tells his followers to ask for the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit is freely given by the Father. He delights to give us this good gift.

So what are we to make of this part of the story? In one sense, it is a cautionary teaching about the deceptive nature of the life-improvement strategies we employ at various stages in our lives as we buckle down to get our worlds together and organized. Whether it's debt reduction, a diet plan, home improvements, or the latest self-help book, we love the idea of getting our lives in order, don't we? I enjoy reading the magazine “Real Simple” because it promises to simplify my life so I that can feel better about my chaos. Just so you know, the magazine has not fixed my life.

None of these activities are inherently bad, but ultimately they fail to deal with the real issues of evil, the insidiousness of the devil and the hold that Satan has on our lives. We can become addicted to short-lived improvements without allowing that space to be filled by the activity of God's Holy Spirit operating throughout creation, the emerging Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ which is permanent, true and locks the door to the evil one.

Jesus tells his opponents that it is by the “finger” of God that I release people...an allusion to Exodus 18 where it is the “finger” of God that liberates the people from bondage and slavery.

Is the finger of God on your life? For it is only the hand of God that can create transformational lasting change, renewing us at the core of our hearts - setting us free.

You know, today in our culture we don't talk much about demon-possession. We'll go to movies or read books about demonic activity, but for many of us it's something foreign, something that doesn't happen in our part of the world. We hear about exorcisms in other countries, but not often here. We may wonder if mental illness fits in the category of demon-possession, but we are still learning about the intersection of spirituality and psychology. We have much more to learn in this area.

But Jesus is clear that evil is real, and that the evil one is working to secure his dominion in our lives. The work of evil surrounds us...as people are systematically and corporately dehumanized, as greed overtakes the lives of many, as we guard secrets in our lives and experience shame. We find evil at work in individuals and in the systems that we serve.

Calvin writes these words about evil: “Satan's snares for entrapping men are beyond all calculation; nay, men are already his slaves, and so firmly bound by a variety of fetters, that they rather cherish the slavery to which they are devoted, than make any aspirations after freedom.”

So...what about evil? How are we to think about it? The Apostle Paul reminds us that this battle is not of flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities, against the rulers, authorities and powers of evil in the heavenly realm. He tells us to dress ourselves with the armor of God—with truth, faith, peace, the Spirit and the Word. These are the tools of this battle. Not self-help books or well-intentioned plans to reform ourselves on our own. Paul's final exhortation in Ephesians is this: *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.*

So Jesus teaches us to pray. He tells us to ask the Father for the Holy Spirit. The battle to release people from the evil one is fought and won by prayer. How are we doing? Are we praying? Jesus teaches us...but only we can get our on knees, open our hearts, and our mouths and engage in the work of the Spirit.

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus finishes his discourse on evil, and just as the last words come out of his mouth, a woman (clearly overwhelmed with what she has heard) cries out:

*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you!*

Hmmm, we think. That's an odd response. What is this woman thinking?

This might seem like an awkward moment to our ears, but the truth is that it was quite common in Jesus' day to praise a person by giving praise to the mother. She's giving Jesus a high compliment. I was surprised to find out earlier this week that this type of praise is still practiced even today.

I was in a coffee shop on Tuesday working on this exact part of the text, and I noticed a woman in a wheel chair trying to get through the bathroom door. She needed help, so (like any of you would do) I walked over to help her. On her way out, she thanked me and she said these words (I kid you not) "If your mother is still alive tell her that an old lady said you did good!" So, Mom—good job!

I like that—the recognition that perhaps good parenting was involved in a child's good standing. We are having another baby later this fall...and I like the idea of praising a mother.

But, Jesus quickly corrects what she says—*Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and obey it.* Jesus is not putting his mother down here. Rather, he is expanding the realm of blessing to those who hear and respond to God's word. We know from earlier in Luke, that Mary heard and obeyed God's word—so she's included here, too. Jesus states that it is not by physical descent, or by birth and blood that one is blessed. Instead, it's by faithful obedience to the work of God—a criterion that is inclusive, for anyone can receive and respond to the word of the Lord.

As one theologian writes, the point is not to be impressed by Jesus, but to be changed. Not to marvel at his words, his strength and wisdom, but to open our lives to a new way of living, to invite the Holy Spirit to form and guard our lives and to let the Kingdom of God lay its claim on our souls.

Lord, teach us to pray, we say along with the disciples. And Jesus not only teaches us but expects that we will actually pray! Blessed are you who hear the word of God and then go and do it!  
Amen.

**Resources:**

Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation, A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching).

John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke.*

Joel P. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT.

John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary, Luke 9:21-18:34.*