

Prayer

Mighty Saviour, give me strength to hold on to the great blessings and gifts You have given me; the blessings of Your promises, Your presence, Your peace, Your guidance, Your healing; and the gifts of salvation, faith, hope, love and eternal life. May I always appreciate the blessings and use the gifts, and testify in all I do to You, the giver of all good things. Thank You for the life You have given me: thank You, Mighty Saviour, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Life at home

All of us live with a mixture of feelings about the homes in which we live; some things are wonderful and some things need attention. Ask for the Lord's help to be discerning.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the benefits of the technology we use
- Pray for those suffering because of poverty
- Pray for those you know who endure personal tragedy

Meditation

(Encouragement)

There is no life essentially better than yours

For the Lord to use for His will:

There is no time better than the present moment

For deciding to do the Lord's will:

There is no place better than where you are now

For beginning to walk the Lord's ways:

There are no circumstances better than yours

For the Lord to start a new work:

There is no greater potential in anyone else

For the Lord to prefer others, not you;

There is no more required than true faith and love

For your life to be right before God!

Alleluia!

Bible Study - Matthew 12:22-32

²² Then they brought to Him a man who was mute and blind, and had a demon. He healed him, so that he could talk and see. ²³ And the whole crowd was amazed, and said, 'Can this really be the Son of David?'

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.'²⁵ Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself is ruined, and every city or house divided against itself cannot stand; ²⁶ So if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself! How then will his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people cast them out? Therefore they will

be your judges. ²⁸ But if it I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹ How can anyone enter a strong man's house and make off with his goods, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house. ³⁰ He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

Review

Our passage today is a very important scripture. The story itself is fairly clear and easy to follow, but this is the first place that Jesus speaks about the nature of evil and its affect on people and the work of the Kingdom. We should also note that following this passage come the famous saying of Jesus about the 'sin against the Holy Spirit', which we will study tomorrow by itself. It is especially important that we pay close attention to what scriptures tell us Jesus said about this. Above all, our interpretation of the text must remain consistent with the general theme of the New Testament, which is the eternal justice and love of God and the compassionate saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the end of the story of Jesus' healing of the man with a withered arm, Matthew tells us that the Pharisees went away to 'conspire against Him ... to destroy Him' (12:14). It should come as no surprise therefore that this story shows them trying to trap Jesus into saying something blasphemous. When they saw that a man who was mute and blind had been brought to Jesus (the Greek implies that he was deaf as well as blind and dumb), they saw their chance to accuse Him of witchcraft and sorcery, which was punishable by death by stoning, according to the Jewish Mishnah (Sanhedrin 7:4).

As soon as the man was brought to Jesus, He healed him and set him free (though it only says he was 'healed'). We can discuss as much as we like whether it was right to call this man demon-possessed, the fact is that we are not in a position to judge. We do not commonly use such discernment today, whereas people of Jesus' day were used to this, and it is wrong for us to assume that they made this assessment simply out of medical ignorance. The crowd's reaction shows that they thought Jesus was indeed the Messiah (12:23), because it was expected that the Messiah would cast out Satan and his demons when He came. This brought a swift condemnation from the Pharisees. To them He was only a sorcerer using magic to manipulate demons, and they accused Him directly of using the higher authority of the 'prince of demons' to minister deliverance (12:24).

Jesus' response to all this was swift and incisive, but His argument in verses 25 to 30 has been misinterpreted over the years. The passage is interesting because it exposes what Jesus thought about Satan, demons and evil. He believed that Satan commanded a Kingdom with an authority structure; that this stood in radical opposition to the Kingdom of God; that demons were capable of being 'cast out' by a variety of people including the Pharisees' disciples (12:27); and that Jesus and Satan were locked in mortal combat over the future of the whole world! The whole set of ideas here present us with some powerful and important questions, but we cannot deny that this was the world as Jesus saw it.

As He answered the Pharisees, we can see how Jesus' perception of things works out. The Pharisees had accused Him of being a demon, so He immediately attacked the idea that demons could drive out demons (12:25). Such internal conflict within a spiritual kingdom was illogical. Satan could be accused of all kinds of cunning, but the idea that he would use a demon to set free a bound man was ridiculous. Jesus challenged the Pharisees therefore about the practices of their own disciples (12:27); He knew that in those days demons were frequently 'cast out' using prayers and incantations, but not by calling upon God. So what were they doing?

This led Jesus to define the difference between His work and that of other exorcists (12:28). He acted with the authority of 'the Spirit of God', and added that this was proof of God's work in the world 'the Kingdom of God has come upon you' (12:28). Then, by way of illustration, Jesus told how it was possible to confront Satan directly (the 'strong man'), defeat him, and so defeat his kingdom. Jesus did not pluck this illustration out of thin air. It was a development of an idea from scripture, from Isaiah 49:24-26, which speaks about the people of God being rescued from a 'strong man' (Satan), by the 'servant of God' (The Messiah), exactly as the people of Jesus' day had long anticipated.

The result of the whole episode was a direct challenge, because in such matters it was impossible to be neutral. Either those listening should accept Jesus' claim, or not; they were either 'for Him' or 'against Him', a clear distinction with consequences which we will hear more of tomorrow! The whole text poses massive questions for us today about what we believe to be the nature of evil and how we express it; but we cannot afford to allow ourselves to dismiss what Jesus said or what He clearly believed. If we do not understand it, then we need to explore all of what the scriptures say about this in Matthew and other books of the New Testament.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How do you respond to the idea that Satan has some authority over the world, and has a command structure of demonic powers? Debate this from the passage.
2. To what extent is 'being bound' is an indicator of the demonic, even today?
3. Discuss in your group the key things that Jesus says about evil and deliverance within this passage.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage is commonly manipulated by people with a particular agenda for promoting certain ways of understanding deliverance ministry, but I have written without much comment because we must all face the questions it poses. There is too much presumption today that we know better than those of Jesus' day about what is demonic and what is not, and most have concluded that virtually nothing is. Unfortunately, if that is all we can say about the nature of evil in our world, then it is not wonder that we are not good at dealing with evil or stopping it today!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Consider carefully what you believe demonic possession to be. Do not follow your own natural inclinations, but look up passages of scripture which mention evil and the demonic, and explore what the Bible has to say.
- Take the opportunity to discuss what you believe about evil and Satan and demons with another respected member of your church. Use this opportunity to let God open up the truth of this subject to you.

Final Prayer

Great and mighty Lord, all praise belongs to you. I was down and You lifted me up, I was in despair and You gave me hope, I was ignorant and You taught me, I was unhealthy and You made me whole, I was focussed on myself and You opened my eyes to my brothers and sisters. Now I know Your love is real; all praise belongs to You. AMEN