

Trembling At God's Word

Jesus has just cast a demon out of the man who was mute (Lk. 11:14). Now, what do you think will happen to this man, if now that he has been set free from bondage, he chooses not to follow God's Word? Clearly, the whole passage is emphasizing the need to appropriately respond to Jesus' Word (cf. vv. 28, 31, 32, 33), contrary to the way some in the crowd responded (cf. vv. 15-16, esp. the Pharisees). But, another clear implication of the whole passage in front of us is what do you think is going to happen to those who have witnessed the miracles Jesus has just performed and simply walk away, rejecting Him as their King? They have been blessed to hear the message Jesus preached and how do they respond? They spurned the gift of God, denying Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Later in the NT, we will learn that the WORD PREACHED comes with the same power as that which was displayed in and through the miracles.

The clearest pronouncement within the Gospels of the sufficient power of God's Word is found in the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk. 16:19-31). You will remember that after they both died, the rich man, suffering in torment within the flames of Hades (vv. 23-25), begged Abraham to send Lazarus, of all people, back to earth, where the rich man's five brothers remained alive, to warn them not to come where the rich man suffered in agony – to that place of torment (vv. 27-28). The exchange between the rich man and Abraham at this point is worth noting in dialogue here:

²⁹ “**But Abraham said**, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ “**But he said**, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ ³¹ “**But he said to him**, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (Lk. 16:29-31).

Don't ever underestimate the sufficiency of the power of God's Word to do what the most amazing miracle can do when coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit!

So, one thing is clear here: according to Jesus' warnings, when God appears in your midst (whether through signs and wonders OR through the preached Word of God) the consequences of remaining indifferent to His holy presence **is terribly and utterly dire!**

We all remember the stories of Israel when God released them from their bondage and how they often chose **not** to follow God's Word. Moses set these challenges before God's people!

¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today **life and prosperity**, and **death and adversity**; ¹⁶ in that I command you today to love the LORD [Yahweh] your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD [YAHWEH] your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. ¹⁷ “**But** if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other

gods and serve them,¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.¹⁹ “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you **life and death, the blessing and the curse.** So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,²⁰ by loving the LORD [YAHWEH] your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD [Yahweh] swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them” (Deut. 30:15-20; cf. Ex. 32:25-29; Josh. 24:15).

Joshua also set two choices before them:

¹⁵ “If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD [YAHWEH], choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD [YAHWEH]” (Josh. 24:15).

Each of these passages remind us of **the devastating consequences** of rejecting or ignoring God's Word! Jesus has come to our world to once again set before Israel **two paths**: the path of life and the path of death (v. 23), and what the world does in response to Jesus' Word has eternal consequences. He has just visualized for the crowd what happens when He, the King, arrives to inaugurate God's Kingdom (v. 20) – demons flee at His royal command (v. 14)! He binds them and plunders their dark kingdom by the mere finger of God (vv. 20, 22). But when those in the crowd **witnessed this miracle** – **the sign of the King's presence** – what happens to those present who simply walk away unchanged?

To answer this critical question, Jesus tells the parable of the returning spirits in vv. 24-26, to explain the terrible consequences of **not** properly responding to God's powerful Word. That power of God is clearly demonstrated here by the ease with which Jesus, **merely by the finger of God**, directs the demons where He wants them to go – here casting them into “waterless places” or the desert wilderness (v. 24), the abode of demons where we are told they can find a place to settle in to their next victim.

But, the freed man is further aggravated when the demons, finding no new host to possess, return to the original man and finding that no change has taken place in response to God's powerful Word, it takes along with itself seven more spirits, even more evil than itself, so that this last state of the man is worse than the first (v. 26). What is going on here? What is Jesus describing?

The Bible presents man in one, and only one, of two states: either he is “in Christ” or “outside of Christ,” which is also reflected in Lk. 11:23. The man “outside of Christ” is “dead in his sin,” under the possession of the devil or the prince of the power of the air (cf. Eph. 2:1-3), a citizen of this present evil age (cf. Gal. 1:4), and blinded by the “god of this world” so that he may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). The only hope that the man “outside of Christ” has is for God to send His Spirit to enact the miracle of regeneration to enlighten, to quicken those who are

dead, back to life (cf. **John 3:3-8**). When Jesus cast the demon out of the man who was mute, he is now in a spiritually neutral state – his house is “swept and put in order” **but vacant!** (cf. **Lk. 11:25**). In other words, nothing has happened in this man's heart in response to God's Word! He remains spiritually empty and therefore dead (cf. **Eph. 2:1**) until he is united to Christ by God's Spirit.

Now, the question arises as to what will happen to this man if, after he has been cleansed by Jesus, he is **not** united to Jesus or put “in Christ”? What happens to a man if after he has witnessed God's powerful Word but does not unite that Word with faith and trust in Jesus? A terrible warning is issued from the author to the Hebrews:

⁴ For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame (**Heb. 6:4-6**).

The radical difference between those who reject God's Word in Christ and those who rightly throw themselves upon His mercy can be seen in case of the man possessed by the legion of demons and what happened after Jesus cleansed him of those terrible evil spirits? We are told that when the townspeople came out to see what had happened that they found him sitting at Jesus' feet, the proper posture of a disciple, who like Mary, is now learning Jesus' Word (**Lk. 8:35; cf. 10:39**). Further, though he wanted to follow Jesus, Jesus instead sent him back into his home country to tell everyone what Jesus had done for him (**vv. 38-39**). What a beautiful picture of what a true disciple of Jesus is all about – someone who listens to Jesus' Word and goes into the world as a witness to His greatness (**Lk. 11:23**)!

But Jesus warns the crowd that if the man, who has just been freed from bondage, refuses to respond to God's Word with faith, the demons will return and finding their original host now empty, they will return sevenfold and the condition of the man will be exponentially worse. The picture here describes **Romans 1** beautifully where a man knows God's power and yet refuses to respond to God appropriately and so God turns him over to an even worse state of spiritual separation from God, eventually ending in complete spiritual ruin and eternal death (**Rom. 1:24, 26, 28**).

What Jesus is calling the crowd before Him to do, as well as you today, is **not** remain indifferent to His Word but to put your faith in Him, to trust Jesus with you whole life, body and soul. And this applies not merely to the man who received the cleansing of the demon but also to all who witness God's powerful Word. This is made abundantly clear in the way Jesus responds to this woman's blessing upon Jesus' mother (cf. **Luke 11:27-28**). Jesus knows that praise is cheap! What pleases God is **not** what merely rolls off the lips of man, but what issues out of the Spirit-transformed heart of man that now loves God with all the heart, all the soul, all the mind, AND loves your neighbor even as Jesus loved each of you. In fact, Jesus warns:

Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him,¹⁹ because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" . . .²⁰ And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.²¹ "For from within, **out of the heart of men**, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries,²² deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness.²³ "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (**Mark 7:18-23**).

Or in another place He says:

⁴³ "For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. ⁴⁴ "For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. ⁴⁵ "The good man out of **the good treasure of his heart** brings forth what is good; and the evil *man* out of the evil *treasure* brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills **his heart** (**Luke 6:43-45**).

Over and over again, the Israelites suffered from attempting to worship God **without a transformed heart** and over and over again God grieved over their **heartless worship**. He said:

¹¹ "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. ¹² "When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? ¹³ "Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies— I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. ¹⁴ "I hate your new moon *festivals* ¹⁴ and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing *them*. ¹⁵ "So when you spread out your hands *in prayer*, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood (**Isa. 1:11-15; Amos 5:21-24; cf. 4:4-5; 8:10**).

Samuel rebuked King Saul:

²² Samuel said, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams (**1 Sam. 15:22**).

But the classic rebuke of **heartless worship** is found in **Psalm 40**:

⁶ Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; My ears You have opened; Burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. ⁷ Then I said, "Behold, I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. ⁸ I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (**Ps. 40:6-8; cf. Heb. 10:5-10**).

Jesus then gives two remarkable analogies to drive home His point: one from the prophet Jonah (**Lk. 11:29b-30, 32**) and another from King Solomon (**v. 31**). He begins however by noting **the incredible**

extent of rebellion is the heart of this present generation of Jews who were so incredibly blessed by God to have been given the opportunity to welcome God's promised Messiah into the world (cf. **Lk. 11:29a**). And yet Jesus describes them as a “wicked, evil generation” (v. **29a**). Why?

Because it is not enough that they have witnessed the power of God's Word but they seek after signs (v. **29**). What does Jesus mean? If you go back to v. **16**, you can see what is at the heart of their seeking. It is **not** a heart of humility and gratitude which gladly receives from God what He gives, as when God gave the Israelites manna, quail, and water in the wilderness, but rather it is a heart of rebellion which puts God to the test. Moses:

named the place Massah [test] and Meribah [quarrel] because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, “**Is the LORD among us, or not?**” (**Ex. 17:7**).

Can you hear Israel's rebellion? After all they had witnessed of God's mighty acts of gracious deliverance, the first chance they get, they throw it all up into His face and question His love. **Ps. 78** beautifully captures the image:

¹⁸ And in their heart they put God to the test By asking food according to their desire. ¹⁹ Then they spoke against God; They said, “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness? ²⁰ “Behold, He struck the rock so that waters gushed out, And streams were overflowing; Can He give bread also? Will He provide meat for His people?” (**Ps. 78:18-20**).

This is what this present generation of Jews is doing to the even greater revelation of God (cf. **Heb. 1:1-3; Jn. 1:14-18; Col. 1:15-20; 2:9-10**). Jesus is the fullness of God in the flesh, standing right before their very eyes and **what do they ask for?** Give us **a sign – prove that you** are who you say you are? The real miracle here is that God did not open the earth beneath the whole lot of them and swallow them whole (cf. **Num. 16:32**)! Who do they think they are? Paul's words are fully appropriate here:

²⁰ On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? (**Rom. 9:20**).

For those who would dare to put God once again to the test, Jesus declares that no greater sign will be given to them than the sign of Jonah (**Lk. 11:29b-30**). By this, Jesus is referring to how Gentiles – the Ninevites - fell to their knees before the preaching of God's Word and repented before God to stay-off the judgment of God (v. **32** – cf. **Jonah 3:1-10**). The Ninevites had enough sense **to tremble** before God's Word coming forth from the mouth of God's prophet, but these Jews who are standing in the very presence of God Himself do not know to fear their Maker! So no greater sign will be given to them than the preaching of the Word of God. Paul said:

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (**1 Cor. 1:22-24**).

The Ninevites – pagan Gentiles - will rise on the day of judgment to testify against the Jews of Jesus' day and condemn them before God's throne because they refused the greater Jonah when He appeared before God's people (**Lk. 11:32**).

Again, Jesus describes an even earlier example of God's grace when He raised up the Queen of Sheba, who came all the way from the region of present-day Yemen to test the greatness of Solomon's infamous wisdom only to be so overwhelmed by God's power within Solomon that she declared before the whole world:

⁹ "Blessed be the LORD [YAHWEH] your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel; because the LORD [YAHWEH] loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness" (**1 Kings 10:9**).

Once again, a pagan ruler was brought to the point of praise, the worship of the personal name of Yahweh, because she had enough sense to tremble at God's Word proceeding out of the mouth of King Solomon (**Lk. 11:31**). And yet, the Jews in Jesus' day would rather put God to the test demanding Him give them a sign to prove who He was (**Lk. 11:16**). Therefore, another Gentile will join their voices with the Ninevites to take the stand on the Day of the LORD to testify against this present generation of Jews and condemn them for rejecting the One whom God graciously sent into the world to bring about the greater Exodus and to establish the greater Kingdom through the One who far surpassed the wisdom of King Solomon (**v. 32**)!

The Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of attempting to snuff-out the Light of God's Word made flesh (**Lk. 11:33**). Jesus warns, "no one goes to the trouble of lighting an oil lamp only to put it in a place where it will not illumine the room" (Bock, 1100; **Lk. 11:33**). Instead, the light is lit to guide the individual carefully through the room so that they may not stumble in the dark. So God has lit-up the dark world of our sin and death with the light of Jesus (**John 1:4-5, 8-9**), the Word made flesh (**John 1:1, 14**) that men may see safely out of the kingdom darkness and into the kingdom of God's marvelous light (**Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9**) if only they will follow Jesus, the way, the truth, the life (**John 14:6; cf. Heb. 12:2**)! As the psalmist declares, "For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light" (**Ps. 36:9**).

But Jesus warns that some who were present before Him have seen the work of God in their very midst – by their very own eyes – and yet they refuse to believe! (**Lk. 11:34**). Because they are unwilling to see who Jesus truly is – their whole body proves to be full of darkness so that even the smallest glimmer of light they do have is truly darkness after all (**v. 35**)! Because they reject the Word that God has put right before their very eyes the consequences are terribly devastating and eternal (**cf. vv. 31-32**).

But the person whom God enables to see the light of God's Word and who clings to Jesus by faith will not only be flooded with the light of God's grace so that his whole body is illumined but the light which God shines through Jesus' disciples will light the nations with His glory (**v. 36**). This is the new people God has come to make – a people to whom the LORD declares:

Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? ² "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word (**Isa. 66:1-2**).

Amen! -SDG-