

March 2, 2008

Matthew 4:23-25 / Revelation 12:1-13:1 / Luke 4:31-37
 Luke (#11) - The Devil, Demons and Doing Exorcisms in Church

How does one preach, to an educated, enlightened, Western audience in the year 2008 on a topic that even devout believers are divided on, skeptical about, or may even read and think secretly to themselves, *"I'm not so sure This is simply an archaic way of describing and dealing with what we now know to be symptoms of mental illness, psychosis, schizophrenia or epilepsy and use drugs and psychiatric therapy to treat."*

Many in "Bible believing churches" don't say it out loud, but that is what they think. And some of you may fall into that category.

Others become very uneasy when a pastor confronts the topic of demonic activity (as I've found to be true in some cases), because that person has never really dealt with, or doesn't like the thought of having to deal with, the evil in their own soul. It's true. Those who deny the depths of their own sinfulness do not like all this talk about the demonic. People who fight the reality of the demonic most are often those who refuse to deal with their own potential for evil.

With others it's simply a topic that scares them (like scary movies). Or an area they have no experience in, and thus the element of the unknown scares them.

Or maybe none of those options describe you. Maybe you're a person who has been in churches where demonic possession was firmly believed, but handled in such an extreme, insensitive and bizarre way that you figure it was best left alone.

And it is true, sometimes people who have delved into it become obsessed, and paranoid that every illness, and every abnormality is influenced by demons — like one preacher I know who "sees a demon behind every rock," or demonic activity in everything! (So much so that I wonder if he can possibly believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, or the Good News that Jesus, in His death, "disarmed the powers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them and triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15)).

And honestly, when its done is such a way, you should pull back, because Jesus refused to do things that way. He was firm and authoritative in the confrontation of forces that have bound and oppress a person's spirit, but he refused to lower Himself into making it like a circus act.

In fact, Jesus never went looking for such things. He simply confronted of the reality of unclean spirits when those spirits made their presence known in a person's life.

You see, I can't go any further without pointing out that in the context this story is nothing more than an actual, visible, illustration of Jesus carrying out the 4th aspect of His ministry mandate in verse 18: The ministry of "*proclaiming release to the oppressed*"— which in this case is release to those oppressed by "evil" (or literally in the text) "unclean spirits."

People possessed by spiritual forces, that enter into them at some point, from outside themselves (unlike the sin that indwells us from conception – Psalm 51:5), and thus make them do sinful, self-destructive, unclean, unholy, unrighteous or impure things (oftentimes against their will).

And that's what I want to talk about today: Demonic possession and oppression (which I do believe is as much a reality today as it was in Jesus day), and how one is released from it. (In fact, as I will share, it is my own personal persuasion that as our society and the world in general heads away from a Christian worldview, and Christian spirituality, we will actually see an increase in demonic activity (and I'll share later why I think that is true).

So **FIRST**, let's set the ground rules for interpreting and applying this text. And as we do let me say that regardless of your own personal subjective beliefs, persuasions, desires, preferences or experiences, the N.T. makes it undeniably clear that demonic activity is real. It wasn't simply ignorance of psychology or mental illness or the science of the mind. Jesus understood it to be real, and dealt with it as real (though obviously in a more balanced and credible way than most of his contemporaries and many today).

In fact, I would go as far as to say that any worldview that does away entirely with the concept and reality of "evil" or "the Satanic," or "spiritual entities called demons," is not a Christian worldview and makes a large portion of the N.T. completely unintelligible.

Though it is true that Christians past and present have gone to unhealthy and superstitious extremes in regard to this Scriptural truth / and have indeed confused mental illness with demonic possession (to the unnecessary hurt of many suffering people) / and although many people who have embraced a belief in unclean spirits have gone to ridiculous extremes, and live with an unnecessary dread or fear of satanic oppression or possession, (even doing themselves psychological harm as a result) — it doesn't make the reality of the demonic any less true!

The Scriptures call for godly wisdom and informed balance, not denial of the truth due to the inherent dangers. William Barclay is right when he says, *“On the whole, modern thought regards this belief in spirits as primitive and superstitious and something which men have out-grown”* (as the result of 2000 years of increased scientific, neurological or medical knowledge).

But he is also perceptive when he goes on to add: *“Modern thought has been swinging around to the admission that perhaps there is something in demons after all. There are certain troubles which have no bodily cause at all, as far as can be discovered. There is no reason why the man is ill, but he is ill. Since there is no physical (or scientific) explanation, some now think that there must be a spiritual one and that demons are not so unreal after all.”*

One of the more well-known people who have adopted this persuasion is the celebrated psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, author of *“The Road less Traveled,”* and its sequel, *“People of the Lie,”* where he confesses he has come to the conclusion that some people are truly evil. In the beginning he did not believe in the devil or demons or exorcism, but now he believes in Satan because he says he has seen, “the face of evil.”

After witnessing two exorcisms, he writes:

“As a hard headed scientist—which I assume myself to be—I can explain 95% of what went on in these two cases by tradition psychiatric dynamics... But I am left with a critical 5% I cannot explain in such ways. I am left with the supernatural—or better yet, the sub-natural... When the demonic finally spoke clearly in one case, an expression appeared on the patient’s face that could be described only as Satanic. It was an incredibly contemptuous grin of utter hostile malevolence.”

(I would agree that 95% of the time (or more) we are not dealing with demonic possession, though demonic influence is much more common.)

Of the other case he writes: *“The patient suddenly resembled a writhing snake of great length, viciously trying to bite the team members. More frightening than the writhing body, however, was the face. The eyes were hooded with lazy reptilian torpor—except when the reptile darted out in attack, at which moment the eyes would open wide with blazing hatred... what upset me the most was extraordinary sense of a fifty-million-year-old heaviness I received from this serpentine being... Almost all the team members at both*

exorcisms were convinced they were in the presence of something absolutely alien and inhuman. The end of each exorcism proper was signaled by the departure of this presence from the patient and the room."

What is M. Scott Peck? Just one of many secular psychiatrists who was confronted by the reality of something he did not believe in, and as an educated person was taught to reject, but could no longer deny once he saw it. (In fact, as a result of his coming to the conclusion that evil was real, he embraced Christianity and became an ordained Episcopalian priest.)

Likewise, I myself, even though becoming a Christian in 1980, was skeptical of the actual reality of evil spirits since I had never seen or witnessed something that could only be described as demonic. I affirmed the possibility, since it was spoken of in the Bible, but in 32 years of life I had never seen any proof of it — which can tend to make one skeptical. As Francis MacNutt points out: People often tend to deny the demonic until confronted by it.

Then I taught a class on healing at my church in Westport in 1988 — (8 years into my Christian walk, and 2 years after my graduation from seminary), where I thought I should share about the possibility of running into the demonic at some point.

Yet rather than simply share what I thought, or had heard, or delve into unsubstantiated hype or sensationalism in my teaching people who've dabbled in the Satanic and the effect it has on them, I decided to go to a Used Book Store where I bought a pre-owned Satanic Bible. The cover was black with a big pentagram on it and written around the circle that surrounded the pentagram was a strange handwritten script.

Anyway, exactly 4 nights after I had shared that material at the Wednesday Night Bible Study (in the church parsonage where I lived) I had an unusual encounter. It was November 6th, 1988. Nancy was about three weeks away from giving birth to Elisabeth, and my whole family had come down that Sunday to celebrate my birthday (and that of my twin sister).

It was about a half hour before midnight when we finally finished cleaning up and got to bed. And as was our custom, Nancy and I would pray together, and then she would roll over and go to sleep, and I would stay up praying because David was 13 months old, and woke up daily at 5:15-5:30 am full of energy and raring to go. So it was seemingly the only time of the day I could count on having quiet, undistracted, uninterrupted time to pray. So we prayed, and Nancy rolled over to go to sleep while I laid there and continued to pray. Then very close to, or just after midnight, I heard Nancy scream in her sleep!

Instantly my eyes popped open, and in the dark, about 1 foot below the ceiling, I saw a florescent pale green ghostlike head floating over the bed, staring down at me — eyes locked on mine — with a dead, lifeless stare on his face.

It was a man's head — bald, clean shaven, obese, with a triple chin, and a distinctive wart on his right cheek (which would have been my left). The head was connected to a neck that spread out into shoulders, and then trailed off into what looked like the wisp of a comet.

It was about 3-4 feet long from the top of his head to the end of the comet tail.

He started on Nancy's side of the bed and floated over to my side of the bed, his eyes locked on mine. And then when he got past my side of the bed, he simply disappeared! So I woke

Nancy and said, "Did you see that?!" "See what she said?" "That thing!" I shouted.

"No" she said, "I didn't see anything." "Then why did you scream?" I asked. And she said, "Because in my dream all these hands were reaching out to strangle me."

Now needless to say, even though I believed the Bible, and affirmed the existence of Satan, and things called demons, I was freaked! In fact, it's one thing to think they may exist (somewhere out there) — it's quite another thing to have it appear right above your bed! It's a bit unnerving! So unnerving that I did the typical, western, scientific thing to do — I searched for a more plausible explanation:

"Maybe," I said to myself (having studied a little bit of Jungian psychology in relation to dreams) "maybe it was merely a projection of my subconscious fears — the projection of fears stimulated by Nancy's sudden scream — that manifested themselves outside me in visual form." "Maybe," I thought, "my mind was playing tricks on me." Or worst of all, I thought, "Maybe at 32 years old, I'm losing it and becoming psychotic, and need to be medicated or institutionalized!"

(It didn't help that when I shared what had happened with a fellow Bible believing minister in my conference, he simply stared at me for a few seconds, turned and walked away without ever saying word — and he has never spoken to me since!)

Believe me when I say: I went through all the possible psychological scenario's. But you know, if it were psychologically induced, there were two things I couldn't explain:

- 1.) My dog, who without fail had slept on the braided rug beside my bed every night for our two years in that house, never came upstairs again! We couldn't even coax him up with food!

2.) Three months later our 15 year old foster daughter (Francine) woke us screaming because she had been awakened in the middle of the night to see two florescent pale green eyes floating about a foot above her face — and we hadn't said anything to her. Nothing! So I knew it wasn't just me! (2 months later we had one last occurrence on Easter Eve of 1989.)

I finally did find two pastors who believed I didn't simply "have a screw loose" (one from the Vineyard / and one from the Episcopal church) who (after I took that book out in my back yard, doused it with gasoline, and burned it) came over to pray through the house with me. And after that we had no more problems in that house for the rest of our 6 years there.

Which brings me to my **SECOND** point: Why it is that such occurrences seem to be on the rise? And my answer it: Because of the loss of a Christian worldview and the influx of pagan ideas, ritualistic spirituality and religious practices. In fact, when Nancy and I were walking on Cocoa Beach in Florida just two weeks ago, at about 8 o'clock in the morning, we came across a strange sight — a dead white goose, three decapitated chickens, and a small water-melon with a hole carved in it with a note stuffed inside. And when I pulled out the note and started reading it (it was in Spanish) it was a prayer to his apparently dead mother asking her for 8-10 special favors. An expression, I assume, of Santeria — a cultic Cuban religion that mixes voodoo with Catholicism, and ancestral worship and practices ritual sacrifices.

You see, it's important to note the stated location of this event in our text for this morning. It's in Capernaum, a town close to the Decapolis. And the Decapolis was the area where Alexander the Great had built ten Greek colonization cities ("deca" meaning ten, "polis" meaning cities — the same word from which we get our English word "metropolis").

Because the Greeks purpose was not simply to conquer, but to spread Hellenistic thought and culture and philosophical and religious views (since they all cohere together); to infiltrate the Middle East with what they thought were superior Greek life and world views, they introduced pagan ideas and practices into Israel.

And in that sense it's extremely interesting to note that whenever Jesus never does an exorcism it is always close to that geographical area of the Decapolis. He never does an exorcism in Jerusalem, or Bethlehem, or Judea, or anyplace close to the epicenter of exclusively Jewish thought and practice. It's always where pagan influences, and non-biblical world views, and superstitious beliefs, and practice of pagan rituals are the strongest.

Demonic activity flourishes where pagan ideas and influences and practices abound. *“The TRUTH shall set you free,”* said Jesus. The truth in Jesus! And where that truth is proclaimed and believed, satanic or demonic influences are contained or subdued.

I’ve mentioned that before. Every pastor who preaches the truth in Jesus, and through the divine power inherent in the Gospel “demolishes strongholds,” does “exorcisms,” or equips people with what they need to keep from falling prey to demonic oppression or possession.

I myself have found that simply teaching the biblical truth that God is absolutely sovereign, and that in Christ we have the spiritual power and authority to “overcome all the power of the enemy,” frees people’s hearts, and minds from the fears, and superstitions and paranoia that can actually lead to demonic oppression.

PAGAN BELIEFS and **RITUALS** which cause people to open themselves up to ANYTHING, and **SUPERSTITION** that creates undue fears and paranoia, increases possibility of demonic possession and oppression, because the demonic feeds on superstition, and fear and paranoia, or people who open themselves up to any spirit or experience.

You can’t have people who dabble in the occult, or participate in séances, or Satanic rituals, or witchcraft (Wicca or white witchcraft as they call it being the fastest growing religion among young women in America), or engage in some forms of magic (that get their power from somewhere other than God) and not see an increase in the prevalence of demonic activity. It’s foolish to think otherwise!

Now, you may be asking — what about me? And in regard to regenerate or born again believers, I personally believe possession by unclean spirits is not possible, though oppression is. Yet even oppression (I believe) is the result of believers giving Satan a handhold, or something to latch onto within them.

For instance, in **UNBELIEVERS** demonic possession (or demonization as some prefer to call it) is possible, because they do not possess the Holy Spirit. Unclean or evil spirits can not only oppress but enter and possess their bodies.

Yet even then, it is usually through the presence of unresolved anger, rage, guilt, depression, hatred, unforgiveness, bitterness or as a result of having been violated sexually — especially in women. Such women, says Neil Anderson, “are often in deep condemnation, both from the enemy and themselves...” And Satan thrives in an atmosphere of self-loathing and deep inner self-condemnation.

Childhood abuse (both verbal and physical) / participation in occult rituals / sitting under false teaching / exposure to hard core pornography / the desire to dominate or have power over others / or having been mentored by a controlling, cult-like, verbally belittling person, can also make an individual more susceptible to the lures of satanic deception, oppression or possession — possession by unclean spirits that make one want to do unclean, unholy, unloving, or self-destructive things.

And even though the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of a **BELIEVER** excludes the possibility demonic possession, they also can become susceptible to demonic oppression by permitting those same things to go unresolved in their lives, and thereby give Satan something to latch onto.

A fearful, self-loathing Christian who has been violated sexually, or harbors unresolved anger, rage, resentment, unforgiveness, bitterness or any of those other things I mentioned, should not be surprised if they find themselves oppressed by the evil one. Not possessed, but oppressed or harassed.

Rarely have I ever found a true brother or sister in the Lord whose struggle with demonic oppression could not be traced back to the presence of one or more of those things. If Satan is oppressing and not backing off, it's usually because he has something he's holding onto. Until that thing is dislodged, it will result in relentless, reoccurring struggle. Confess it, repent of it, forgive it, or resolve it, but don't let it continue unaddressed.

Which brings us to our **THIRD** and **FOURTH** and **FIFTH** point all in one: The prescribed method of liberation, Jesus sovereignty over evil, and the result. In verses 31-32 we see that Jesus is teaching (presumably the Gospel of the Kingdom) with great power and authority. And if we understand the passage right, it is apparently the bold and powerful proclamation of that truth that stirs the demon to speak and make its presence known.

So, as Jesus is teaching this demon, inhabiting this man, is stirred up and can't remain silent any longer. The presence of purity and holiness and divine power and Gospel truth in Jesus, grates against the impure, vile, deceptive and evil nature of the demon until he *"cries out at the top of his voice"* (or as we would say: "he screams at the top of his lungs), *'Ha! What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth?'* (literally, *"What do we have in common, Jesus of Nazareth?"*)
 Though as some scholars point out, it carries the sense *"Ha! Don't meddle with us!"*)

So, imagine your self being there in this synagogue (this “church building” we could say), sitting down and listening to Jesus (who is also sitting down as he teaches — that’s how teaching was done in the synagogue as we saw in verse 20). And all of a sudden, out of nowhere, and catching everyone off guard, the whole place is set on edge by a man who screams at the top of his lungs, most likely in a voice that is not his own — in an angry, disturbed, sinister way, ***“Ha! Don’t meddle with us!”***

It must have freaked them out! Every person was probably in shock, and their nerves on edge, as the whole place is disrupted by one of the regular church going folk, evidencing what no one ever would have suspected about him — he’s inhabited by evil or unclean spirits! He’s possessed by a demon!

Yet Jesus is not thrown off in the least. It’s part of what he came to do — to release the oppressed. In fact, though he always has pity on the possessed person, he has no pity on the spirit that possesses him. With even the most vile sinners — prostitutes, tax collectors and the woman caught in adultery — it’s pity, kindness and compassion. But with the demon it’s nothing but a blunt, stark, stern, authoritative command.

In fact, He sternly orders the demon to shut up! The exclamatory phrase ***“Be quiet!”*** in verse 35 is too soft a translation. It’s the thing a king would say to a person or group who got rowdy or out of hand in his presence. He’d look at the unruly people, who had the audacity to be disrespectful in his presence, and with the authority he possessed, he’d say at the top of his voice: ***“SILENCE!”*** or ***“SILENCE THAT MAN!”***

That’s what the Greek literally says in verse 35: ***“BE SILENCED! Jesus told the man sternly!”***
DON’T YOU DARE SAY ANOTHER WORD!!!!

And then with equal sternness and authority and power — and not giving the spirit any choice or alternative in the matter — Jesus commands the demon to come out of the man — and it must obey! It has no choice!

It does take one last swipe at the man by throwing him down on the ground before he comes out, but then in cowering, dog-like fashion, the demon does what it must, being cast out of the man by the authoritative and irresistible power of Jesus stern command! The demon that made the poor man do things against his will, meets his match, and is himself made to do things against his will!

No incantations! No sprinkling of holy water from the Jordan (or the Vatican)! No ranting and raving or Hollywood showmanship!

Just the firm, authoritative, spoken command of Jesus which the spirit has no option but to obey. Because as I mentioned before, **Jesus is Sovereign over everything** — including demons.

But don't miss the point of the passage: *So is the believer (who likewise possesses the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom authority of Jesus) must, with similar firm, bold, confident, stern, believing resolve, command evil spirits to leave (and they will).*

Note what it says in verse 36: *“What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out.”* They took it as instruction. They saw it as Jesus teaching them that: You command evil spirits to leave, in the name and the power of Jesus, and they must! They have no other alternative but to obey!

You don't talk timidly to evil! You don't confront a demonic presence with fear, doubt or lack of resolve! You tell it what it must do! You command it in Jesus name and it must do it! God has given us power and authority to *“trample upon serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy.”*

Making sure (if you confront the demonic) that you actually believe in the name of Jesus (His Sovereign Rule and Unquestioned Lordship over evil spirits) lest you end up like the Jewish exorcists in Acts 19 who get their butts kicked by a demon possessed man, because they use the name of Jesus, without believing in Jesus (or possessing the Holy Spirit).