

July 19, 2009

Matthew 13:31-34 / Luke 10:17-20 / Luke 11:14-23

The Kingdom of God – Seeing, Seeing or Seeing?

Today I need to begin by reminding you of something you may KNOW, but may occasionally allow to SLIP AWAY from your conscious thoughts — Like the FACT that we are presently, at this very hour, engaged in a war!

And I'm not talking of the continuing war with terrorists, or the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, though those are also symptoms of it. No. The "war" I'm talking about is the war between two opposing spiritual kingdom -- the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. The ongoing war between good and evil / justice and injustice / godliness and wickedness / things as they are versus things as God intends them to be!

It's a war that rages 24/7, in part of the globe — and is evidenced, not just when horrible things happen (like the attack on the twin towers on 9/11 and we see it with undeniable clarity), but also in our own lives, in the frequent battles we ourselves fight with sin, temptation, greed, envy and lust. / Materialism, laziness, anger, and bitterness. / Pride, selfishness, apathy, and bodily appetites that are out of control. / Sickness, guilt, depression and so much, much more!

Whether we choose to believe it or not, Jesus would say that all those things are evidences of a battle that goes on all around us and inside us all the time — a battle between the forces of two opposing kingdoms which are led by two opposing kings! Or in keeping with today's passage — a battle led by the forces of two opposing kingdoms — one led by Jesus, and the other led by Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

You see, you cannot read or study the Gospels, without seeing that Jesus understood Himself to be engaged in a war, where two different kingdoms were vying for supreme rule over this world and all the hearts and souls of all who live in it. A war involving Satan, spirits, demons, angels, and as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:10-18, "***the powers, principalities and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.***"

It's a truth that comes out with undeniable clarity in today's passage where this man's muteness (or inability to speak) was somehow understood by Jesus to be the result of demonic influences — though some today would say we now know better, or that Jesus was just playing along with the beliefs of the people of His day — both of which I reject.

I KNOW it's not popular, or even acceptable to believe or speak that way today. So much so that if you do, people will question your mental stability! Though that is what the Bible teaches, Walter Wink is right when he says in his book 'Unmasking the Powers':

"What does... Western society exclude from conversation? Certainly not sex... sexual exploits scarcely raise an eyebrow. But if you want to bring all talk to a halt in shocked embarrassment... try mentioning angels, demons or the devil. You will be quickly appraised for signs of pathological violence and then quietly shunned... These...are the unmentionables of our culture. The dominant materialistic worldview has absolutely no place for them. These archaic relics of a superstitious past are unspeakable because modern secularism simply has no categories, no vocabulary, no presuppositions by which to discern what it was in the actual experiences of people that brought these words to speech. It has massive resistance even to thinking about these phenomena, having fought long and hard to rid itself of every vestige of transcendence.... (Yet) What increasing numbers of people are realizing, both inside and outside organized religion, is that Christianity's lack of credibility is not a consequence of the inadequacy of its intrinsic message, but of the fact that its intrinsic message cannot — simply and categorically cannot—be communicated meaningfully within a materialistic cosmology (a worldview which believes that eradicating the categories of spirits, angels, demons and evil is a sign of progress) ... What I wish to argue, however, is that recovery of these concepts and a sense of the experiences that they named, can play a role in eroding the soil from beneath the foundations of (a godless) materialism."

That's what I'd like to seek to do today as well — help you recover a conscious awareness of "those concepts and a sense of the experiences that they named."

Not simply to help "erode the soil from beneath the foundations of the godless materialistic worldview that dominates the West," but to help you gain a biblical perspective on life, and with it, the wartime mentality we all need to sustain to some degree if we are ever to do effective spiritual battle with the powers that be, win out over temptation, get off the fence in regard to which side we are on and zealously seek to enlist others for the battle.

And I'd like to do that by speaking on the three aspects of seeing that Luke points out in this passage. 1.) The seeing that comes through observation (v. 14). 2.) The seeing that comes through reason (vv. 17-18) and 3.) The seeing that comes when faith builds upon what it knows by observation, is forced to concede by reason and is then told by divine revelation (vv. 19-23).

So without any further delay let's look **FIRST** at the "seeing" that comes through observation. This passage begins by presenting people who witnessed it with a dilemma, because they all witnessed Jesus driving a demon out of a man who was mute, or unable to speak. Whether they actually saw a demonic spirit leave the man or not we do not know. All we know is that Jesus (probably in verbal fashion) cast a demon out of a man, and as a result, a man who had been unable to speak was suddenly able to talk. And as a result, "the crowd was amazed." No one questioned that a miracle had taken place. The evidence stood before them. A person they all knew, healed of his inability to speak through exorcism!

Thus for them, the issue was not whether it happened. They all agreed on that! They had all seen something that astounded them. The evidence was irrefutable! That's the first type of "seeing" we come across in this passage — the "seeing" that comes through visual observation.

But such "seeing," as the passage makes clear, does not lead them to believe. Why not? Because even those who actually witness a miracle, must still determine what caused it. Not IF it happened, but HOW it happened. Or in this case, not whether it happened, but what source of power Jesus had tapped into in order to do it.

It's an issue I still deal with frequently: People who admit they actually witnessed a miracle. But instead of it convincing them of the reality of God, they begin to question if God was involved at all. After all, maybe it was psychosomatic. Maybe it was the power of positive thinking. Was it mind over matter. Maybe it was magic, or some universal life force that anyone can tap into — but not God. "Who can know for sure," they will say, "that it was the Holy Spirit?"

In our text they suggest that maybe the power Jesus is tapping into is not God, or the Holy Spirit, but Satan. And so, to help resolve the issue, Jesus pushes them to see with the **SECOND** kind of "seeing." The "seeing" that comes through the use of reason or logic. Though it makes some Christians uncomfortable, what Jesus does here is not simply declare that His power comes from God and not Satan, but encourage them to use their own powers of reason or logic or just plain common sense to figure out the answer!

The crowd consists of THREE separate groups:

- 1.) Those who know He does miracles through the power of God (the disciples and others).
- 2.) Those who want to believe it was God working through Him, but feel they need a sign from God to be absolutely sure (v. 16).
- And 3.) Those who are convinced it's *"By Beelzebub, the prince of demons that He drives out demons"* (v. 15).

(And here, just as a SIDE NOTE: The NIV goes with the name "*Beelzebub*" which means "*The lord of the flies*" — flies often being equated with demonic or satanic activity, while most other versions use the name "*Beelzeboul*," which means, "*The lord of dung*." And though it makes little difference, the latter is surely the best translation. Satan (according to Jesus) is "*The lord of dung*" or "*The lord of excrement*.")

So, what logic does Jesus use to help them "see" that it couldn't be Satan that gives Him the power to cast out demons? And the answer?

The logic that flows from the understanding that what we have here are the forces of two kingdoms at war with each other! Not simply because anyone can follow the logic of how foolish it would be for one part of a kingdom to be working against another part of the same kingdom when trying to win a battle, but because that's exactly what we really are dealing with! Two kingdoms vying for who will dominate, win out or rule in this man's life.

Jesus is the king or Lord of one kingdom, and Satan (or Beelzeboul the "Lord of dung") is the king or prince of the other. And it would make no sense whatsoever, asserts Jesus, for Satan to give Him power to defeat the demons under his own command!

It would be as ludicrous as the top ranking U.S. military commander sending half his troops over to the Al Queda, or the Taliban, to help defeat the US forces in those places! The mere suggestion is so irrational that logic alone is sufficient to refute it.

Kingdoms seeking to establish and maintain or extend their rule over certain people or nations, do not give their enemies the power to defeat them! It's ridiculous and entirely illogical to even suggest it!

Yet Jesus doesn't stop with that in His attempt to get them to see His power cannot possibly come from his opponent. He asks them, "And what about your followers?" "If I drive out demons by Bellzeboul, by whom do your followers drive them out?"

It's still the use of reason, but this time it's using their own reason against them! For if the "prince of demons" gave the power to drive out demons, then that would mean their own followers (Jewish exorcists as we find in Acts 19) must also be accused of tapping into the powers of Satan — an accusation none of them would have the gall to suggest!

You make such suggestions, says Jesus in verse 19, and *“They (your own followers who likewise engage in a ministry of casting of demons) will be your judges.”* They’ll tell you what “power source” one must “tap into” in order to cast out demons.

Thus, by reason alone, Jesus silences His detractors! Because logic alone is sufficient to convince any reasonable person that Satan would never give anyone the power to overthrow his own kingdom!

Which brings us to the **THIRD** way of “seeing.” A way this is necessary precisely because observation and reason and logic are not enough to bring a person to believe. What is this third way of seeing? It’s the way of “seeing” whereby people exercise faith. Observation gets the mental wheels spinning, and reason pares the options down significantly, but a belief that results in settled conviction only comes when it surrenders to what it is told through divine revelation.

Thus, in verse 20, Jesus settles the issue once and for all, by telling them straight out: *“If I drive out demons by the finger of God (or as it’s phrased in Matthew – “by the Holy Spirit”), then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.”*

What then is the source of Jesus power? The “finger of God,” or “the Holy Spirit.” And what were the miracles the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus to do a sign of? The fact that the kingdom of God, which Jesus had been speaking of all along as coming or advancing or being near, had finally come upon them in a very real or tangible way.

“The power of God that enabled Christ to cast out demons,” says R. Kent Hughes, *“was proof positive of the presence of the kingdom of God.”* *“The exorcisms and miracles of Jesus,”* says Craig Evans, *“are signs of the presence of the kingdom.”* *“The presence of the kingdom,”* says Leon Morris, *“is to be seen, not in good advice or pious practices, but in the power that expels the forces of evil.”*

You see, today we come to a significant turning point in the ministry of Jesus. Because today is the first time we ever hear Jesus saying in the Gospels that the kingdom of God has come upon them. That it’s arrived, or is present.

His initial message was: *“Repent for the kingdom of God is NEAR.”* Not long afterward He tells a crowd: *“The kingdom of God has been forcefully advancing...”* (Mt. 11:12).

Yet His declaration in today's passage is distinctly different. WHY? Because today, for the very first time, instead of speaking of the kingdom as something that's near or something that's coming soon or something that has been forcefully advancing, we read that it has finally arrived!

"If I drive out demons by the finger of God (or the Holy Spirit)," says Jesus, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you." The exercise divine power and authority or sovereign rule over the kingdom of darkness and the forces of evil, which is proof positive that the Kingdom of God has come!

"But it doesn't seem like the Kingdom of God is present," says one person. "I thought that when the kingdom came," says another, "we would be ushered into the eternal state."
"I thought when the kingdom came perfection would come," says yet another.

Yet that's where Jesus' words in Matthew 13 help us. For there He tells us that our concept of the kingdom needs revamping (just like the Jews in Jesus day needed to revamp theirs).

One thing they needed (and we need as well) is to rid our minds of completely of the belief that the kingdom of heaven would come crashing in upon the world, with devastation and cataclysmic events, and in a moments time drastically change everything!

That's one of the reasons that the Jews could not perceive or believe that the kingdom had come in Jesus ministry. They were expecting apocalyptic type phenomena! The earth being shaken, fires and smoke and burning and storm clouds and lightning and the melting of the elements and all that type of stuff!

They didn't listen to Jesus when He said the kingdom of God won't come that way! Rather, He said, *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in it."*

"The kingdom of heaven," he goes on, *"is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour, until it worked all through the dough."*

That brings us to my LAST point – the whole point of the passage — which is *"Do you personally see?"* Do you see that the kingdom of God doesn't come crashing in in an instant and totally turn everything upside down! Do you see that it's starts out as imperceptibly as YEAST working

through the dough slowly. Do you see that it begins like something as small as the **SMALLEST OF ALL SEEDS** and grows imperceptibly over time until it eventually becomes a large tree that *“the birds of the air nest in.”*

That’s what Jesus wants us to see! The kingdom had come upon them! The seed was planted in the soil the day He spoke these words! The yeast was put in the flour, and has now been working its way through the dough for the last 2000 years! The kingdom was established and is still present in this world even as I speak. That’s why the power of God that drove out demons and healed the sick then is also available to us today — because the kingdom is present wherever the power of the Holy Spirit is present!

That’s what He also wants us to see! C. S. Lewis so beautifully conveyed that same message in his book “The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe.” The witch rules Narnia (just as Satan is said to be the prince of this world). It’s her domain. She rules over her kingdom. But as Aslan (the Lion who represents Jesus) approaches, all of a sudden the cold wintery grip she holds over Narnia begins to be broken! The snow begins to melt and the flowers begin to pop up through the snow!

WHY? Because the power of Aslan’s kingdom is slowly and almost imperceptibly breaking in upon Narnia and thus breaking the witches rule! The Holy Spirit = the power of the Kingdom!

George Eldon Ladd also helps dispel another bit of confusion people have when he says: *“God’s rule de jure,” “(that is, in the strict legal sense) exists universally over the heavens and the earth; but His rule de facto (that is, the concrete manifestation of that rule in the various situations of life) exists only when people submit themselves to the divine rule.”*

And it’s the second aspect — His kingdom or rule de facto — that we are dealing with today when Jesus says, *“The kingdom of God has come upon you.”* Jesus would never have questioned the fact that God’s rule de jure had always been present throughout OT times.

But what He NOW wants them to know is that through His ministry and the power of the Holy Spirit being exercised through Him, “God’s rule de facto” is being manifested. And demons submitting to Him or people being healed are proof of it!

You see, what Jesus wants us to understand is that the kingdom of God is **NOT** a place, but the exercise of God’s sovereign power or rule. It’s not heaven, as has frequently and wrongly been taught. If it were heaven, Jesus could not say, “It has now come upon you.” It’s not the place we call heaven or He could not say, “It has been forcefully advancing.”

No! It's like an unstoppable, marching, invisible, sovereign realm of divine life and power that dispels (little by little) the forces of evil, as well as those things caused by the forces of evil — such as sickness, muteness, blindness, disease, paralysis, self-destructive tendencies, addictions and sinful urges.

“Evil has a strong grip on men,” says Leon Morris, “But that strong grip is decisively broken when the kingdom of God comes in” (for) the kingdom of God... is the overthrow of evil.”

That's the message of today's passage! The kingdom is like an invisible domain all around us. The question is, “Has it come upon you?” Have you stepped into that domain? Jesus repeatedly invites us to enter the kingdom, the question is, have you?

How do I enter it, you ask? And Jesus tells us: By being born again. ***“No one can see or enter the kingdom of God, unless he is born again,”*** says Jesus. ***“You must be born again.”*** ***“You must be born of water and the Spirit,”*** He says. There is no other way!

In fact, you must entrust your life to Him without reserve. That's verse 23! ***There is no middle ground in a war where only two kingdoms are involved! In WWII Switzerland could remain “neutral,” because the kingdom of Germany was attacking other kingdoms like Poland and France and England. But if there are only two kingdoms, you can't be neutral when war breaks out! You're either fighting the enemy or letting the enemy win by not fighting them!***

That's why people today have such a hard time understanding how Jesus can say ***“He who is not with me is against me.”*** Because we're under the modern misconception that there are a slew of options!

Not so, says Jesus! There are only TWO! There is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of darkness! And because there are no other options, there is no neutrality! The kingdom of God is invading this world, and you are either advancing the cause of that kingdom by your belief, submission and obedience to Him, OR you are thwarting the cause of that kingdom by refusing to believe, submit and obey!

Jesus says very plainly: *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters."* That's what we need to know! Contrary to what we may think, we can't be neutral in a war where there are only two kingdoms! You are either part of one or the other.

And thus He comes to you and very pointedly asks you (today, through me): Are you for Him or against Him? Because there is no middle ground! To remain neutral is to oppose Him! To refuse to make a decision is to make a decision!

In the battle against the forces of evil, to do nothing is to encourage its spread! If I see a burglar break into my neighbor's house, and I do nothing to either report it or stop it, I'm actually encouraging it!

The same is true in regard to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness: Neutrality IS opposition! To refuse to join with Jesus is to continue to side with Satan.

So I ask you:

What will your choice be? Will you side with Jesus, or by refusing to side with Him, will you oppose Him and continue to be a tool in the hand of the enemy? Will you join with Jesus in the battle for the harvest, or will you scatter while Jesus is gathering, by refusing to join with Him?

Will you enter His kingdom through spiritual rebirth, or stay loyal to the one you are already in by virtue of simply being born into this world of sin?