

In this world there are acts of unspeakable horror that make our blood run cold. In these events we probably see a glimpse of God’s enemy in this world, and our enemy. For example, the Cumbria shootings in June 2010 in northern England occurred when a lone gunman, taxi driver Derrick Bird, a middle-aged man with little to no history of personal violence, went on a shooting spree murdering a dozen people including his own brother and others he knew. He also drove up to many total strangers, shooting them at point blank. **The cruelty and senselessness of acts like this send a chill up our spine and make us aware of the power of evil in this fallen world.** There are other similar examples to point to; many of them right here in our own country.

Am I crazy seeing “the god of this world” in examples like this, creating a spirit of unbridled hatred which in and of itself is a kind of murder? When we go to the third chapter of Genesis we are introduced to Satan in the form of a serpent who tempts our first parents. The fourth chapter of Matthew introduces us to presumably the same devil who tempts the Lord Jesus in the wilderness. If you have ever been tempted to do something bad, then you have been influenced by Satan whether you believe in him or not. My point is that we don’t have to go very far into the story of the Bible, especially in the life of Christ, without coming across the influence of the devil. Modernists have attacked this feature of the Bible claiming that it shows Christ was a child of his time, that the people of Galilee believed in the devil, so he went along with it. They also claim that in Jesus’ heart of hearts he couldn’t have believed in demons. And they confidently dismiss any thought of Satan getting involved in the lives of people today—particularly in their own lives.

Yet in the gospels we see that Jesus was always resisting the errors of his fellow countrymen, correcting their wrong ideas, standing against the authority of the Pharisees, even laying down his life for his own convictions. So, it seems strange that he would relentlessly affirm the beliefs of ordinary people—men,

women, and children—who were under the influence of demons from which he delivers them. In fact, there are many examples in the gospels in which our Lord saves people from satanic powers. If these people were deluded about this, if the truth was that these people were having a nervous breakdown or under psychiatric pressures, or if they were just mentally or physically ill in some way, then why didn't Jesus deal with them in truth and tell them, "It's not because of demons that you are like this," and deliver them from compounding their troubles by believing a lie about Satan? Is Jesus the Great Physician or not? Great physicians warn their patients about self-diagnoses that are false. If he loved them, surely Jesus wouldn't allow them to go on believing lies.

C.S. Lewis points out in the introduction to his famous book, *Screwtape Letters*, that the modern world divides into those who are obsessed with demonic powers and those who mock them as outdated rubbish. Neither approach, Lewis insists, does justice to the reality. I'm with C.S. Lewis on this. Nevertheless, I've told you before that I never met anyone who I believed was demon-possessed and that most ministers I know stand with me in this regard. The case before us from Matthew 12 is extremely rare in western Christianity, maybe even non-existent, but it was fairly common in Israel when Jesus walked the earth. **Why did this sudden outbreak of demonic activity happen during the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry?**

I think I know. **Wherever we look, it appears that Jesus was aware of a great battle in which he was already involved and that would, before too long, reach some kind of climax.** From his temptation in the wilderness, throughout his entire ministry, Jesus was in a battle with evil forces. **His confrontations with demon-possessed people provide settings where this battle is clearly evident.** Jesus defeated Satan in his wilderness temptations, a fact to which he alludes in verse 29 by describing entering a strong man's house by tying him up. The Lord adds that he did this so "*Then he can plunder his house*" (v. 29). There's a thematic climax in the previous verse, verse 28, when Jesus says that by driving out demons there is evidence that God's

Kingdom has come upon all those present. **After all, didn't Jesus teach us to pray for God's Kingdom to come, and that God's will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*?**

Gustav Aulen, a Lutheran theologian of the last century, looks to this very passage in Matthew 12 as the basis for his theology of Atonement as Christ's ultimate victory over Satan. **Aulen named his Christology *Christus Victor*, the atoning work of Christ that emphasizes his triumph over the evil powers of this world**, by which Jesus rescues his people and establishes a new relationship between God and the entire world. For the last one thousand years of church history this was the classical view of Christ's atoning work.

The healing of this man who was both blind and mute because of demon possession offers a vivid illustration of the nature of Satan's work that limited this man by blindness and bound him with the inability to speak. The story recorded by Matthew tells us in one short sentence that Jesus healed him. Matthew doesn't give any detail of the actual miracle. He focuses instead on the comments of people as to whether Jesus might be the "*Son of David!*" **You see, faith has begun to dawn. Even though Jesus didn't fit their image of the "*Son of David*," they were astonished by his deeds that were of such a powerful nature that all the people had stirrings of renewed hope.**

The scribes and Pharisees were prejudiced against Jesus and suggested an answer that placed Jesus in league with the prince of devils. The word "*Beelzebub*" (in case you're wondering) is derived from 2nd Kings 1:2 in reference to the god of Ekron, a word meaning "exalted lord." But to show their contempt, the New Testament writers used the name Beelzebub to mean, "lord of dung" or "lord of the flies." The Pharisees use this contemptuous insult to suggest that Jesus drives out demons *by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons*. **They had some nerve!!** Didn't they?

Jesus calmly responds with a series of convincing arguments: **First**, if he was casting out demons with the help of the ruler of demons, then this demonic

kingdom was self-destructing. **Second**, the Jews themselves practiced exorcism, so they must be succeeding by using some sort of demonic power, therefore, they were condemning themselves. **And third**, if he was casting out demons, which they admitted by their statement, then it must be evidence that he entered the strong man's house and defeated the strong man! Jesus' defeat of Satan in the wilderness through his authority as God's one and only Son enabled him to cast out these demons with ease. Jesus' authority and exorcism methods stood in stark contrast to the reality show large-scale strange practices of the Jewish exorcists.

We should also not skip over the curious concluding verses of this passage. **The first thing** is that in Jesus' actions the Kingdom of God had come. Matthew used the term "*kingdom of heaven*" more frequently while the other Gospel writers used the expression "*kingdom of God.*" Most scholars agree that the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven are one and the same. The Kingdom of God exists wherever God reigns, and the Kingdom of heaven exists where heaven reigns, with "*heaven*" used as another name for God. Jesus wasn't talking about the Church, which following Pentecost actually becomes the visible expression of Kingdom reality, but of the Kingdom which comes and will ultimately come in its fullness. **The second thing** is the necessity to make *our* decision about Christ. **We are either for him or against him. We can't be neutral.** There are only two kingdoms, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. This is the "*sword*" Jesus speaks of in Matthew 10:34 when he says, "*I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*" In chapter 12, Jesus' teaching draws a clear distinction—**those not with him are against him.** It's a statement of awareness but also of judgment. Verse 30 basically says our commitment to Jesus or our rejection of him is inescapable for us all!

The expression of God's grace is a love that forgives sin, a love that reaches beyond the issue to the person and releases that person by the mercy of God. And this grace of forgiveness is known fully in Christ who is God's extension of forgiving grace, the same Christ who absorbed human hostility and sin to bear the costliness of God's redemptive love. But if we completely

reject what God is doing by his Spirit's power in and through Christ and despise his Word, we cut ourselves off from his freely given forgiveness. Numbers 15:30 says, "*Anyone who sins defiantly...blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel.*" (I read that from the KJV for effect).

Jesus repeats that those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit are *severing themselves from the only power* that can bring them to repentance and to the forgiving grace of God. **Forgiveness always exists within a relationship.** It's not a package that we can pick up and run away with. Consequently, we cannot know real forgiveness if we close off our lives to God. Mennonite teacher Dr. Myron Augsburger wrote that "**For those of us worried about having committed the unpardonable sin, the very fact of our conviction is evidence that the Spirit is still being heard.**" We can also look at it this way: Jesus' mention of an *unpardonable* sin implies that sin *is pardonable!* The pardonable sin would be a person's rejection of Jesus' claims *without* a blasphemous defiance of the Holy Spirit's work of conveying God's truth and bringing the world to Jesus.

In this gospel story is the case of a man blind and mute. He couldn't see the sunrise or the faces of those he loved. Jesus taught his followers to pray aloud, *to say the Lord's Prayer*. This man could not say it. He could not praise God. He could not cry out to our Father in heaven. He couldn't express love for his neighbor. He couldn't even SEE his neighbor!! He was trapped inside his own body! **We were made to give glory to God and enjoy him forever, to address him as children address their own father.** But the enemy of our souls clamped down on this poor man making him blind and mute.

God's enemy locked up this man's spirit within himself. That would be what Satan would do to all of us, if he could; make us a blind and mute congregation, turning Ken Mawr into a place where we couldn't set our eyes on people we know and love, or sing the praises of our God and King. How would we manage? What could we do? Jesus Christ came into the world, to deliver us from the devil and his demons. **So...we would turn to him. We would turn in faith to Jesus our Savior and Lord!** Amen.