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Luke 11:14–28

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# LET FREEDOM RING!

*SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE*

August 28 of this year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's civil rights speech in Washington D.C. Standing before the Lincoln Memorial he opened by saying,

Five score years ago a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beckoning light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later the Negro is still not free.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, as our history painfully proves, it is one thing to make a proclamation of freedom, but it is quite another to accomplish it. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus laid out his mandate of freedom before a hometown audience in Nazareth. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, he said,

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me  
a to *proclaim* good news to the poor.**

**b He has sent me to proclaim *liberty* to the captives  
x and recovering of sight to the blind,**

**b' to set at *liberty* those who are oppressed,  
a' to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19 *ESV*)**

Freedom was the major thrust of Jesus' mission, highlighted by the repeated reference to “liberty” (*aphesis*, better translated as “release”). In the first instance liberty is announced “to the captives,” which in Luke-Acts signifies “forgiveness”—that is, “release from sins” and “debts.” In the second instance “liberty” is secured as “the oppressed” are sent away “in release.” The “year of the Lord's favor” is a reference to the year of Jubilee, when once every fifty years debts were cancelled and slaves set free (Lev 25:8-17). Because of God's outrageous generosity and grace, individuals in Israel were given the opportunity to start over with a clean slate at least once in their lifetime. In order to ignite Israel's imagination for a future hope, Isaiah used the language of Jubilee to describe the redemption that awaited Israel after her rescue from exile.

In our text today Jesus casts a demon out of a man who is mute, setting him free to speak. While the miracle itself only occupies one verse, the controversy it provokes dominates the text. In response to slanderous accusations and malicious skepticism, Jesus gives a rigorous defense of his ministry and spells out the significance of the man's deliverance in no uncertain terms. It is evidence that the year of Jubilee has arrived! Let freedom ring and “proclaim liberty throughout all the land” (Lev 25:10).

As we examine the text, I want you to put yourself in the shoes of the deaf-mute and reflect on the impact Jesus' words would have had upon you.

## I. Seeking Signs and Propagating Propaganda (Luke 11:14-16)

**Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. (Luke 11:14-16)**

It's difficult to imagine what it would be like to be mute, walled off in a prison of silence from all human conversation. But consider the horror when your sole cellmate is a violent abuser, who never stops ranting and raging with vile speech. Shut out from those you love and shut in with one who hates you—it is pure torture. Then one day you encounter a prophet from Galilee who, for no apparent reason, takes pity upon you and with a violent force, casts out the demon. For the first time in decades you can speak. You are free at last, free at last, free at last! But while you are ecstatic with joy, you notice that not everyone in the crowd is pleased.

Several within the crowd begin to raise serious questions as to the source behind Jesus' display of power. Unable to deny the miracle, they launch into a propaganda campaign, accusing Jesus of being in league with “Beelzebul, the prince of demons.” When reason fails, mud is a good substitute. The name “Beelzebul” or “Beelzebub” (1 Kgs 1:2-3) originally referred to a pagan god and later became a derisive term for Satan, meaning something like “Lord of the Flies.” A second group, skeptical of Jesus' authenticity, demands “a sign from heaven.” They give the appearance of being honest intellectuals who need just a bit more evidence before making a commitment. Your heart protests, “A sign! Are you kidding me? What about me? Am I a non-person?” Their demand for a sign is actually a form of disbelief designed to keep the reality of a moral imperative (that is pressing in upon them) at a distance.

When we consider what Jesus just taught the disciples on prayer and the response he now receives, the contrast could not be greater. As Luke Timothy Johnson observes,

Now rather than asking and receiving the “Holy Spirit from heaven,” these opponents seek a “sign from out of heaven.” Rather than praying to God to deliver them from testing, they deliberately put Jesus to the test. Rather than ask forgiveness of sins, they in effect accuse Jesus of the sin of collusion with Satan. Rather than recognize in Jesus the one who proclaims the kingdom of the Father, they accuse him of being a minion of Satan's rule.<sup>2</sup>

How do you react as you listen to the slanderous accusations hurled upon the one who healed you, to say nothing of being dismissed as a non-person, whose miraculous healing is not worthy of celebration? As a peacemaker, I always have had an aversion to conflict and controversy. And yet, in the mystery of God's kingdom, it seems that confronting opposition is a necessary component to

the spread of God's rule on earth. Simeon had predicted that Jesus' ministry would bring a sharp division in Israel, and now it is coming to fruition.

## II. Dismantling Slander and Skepticism (Luke 11:17-19)

### A. A fatal flaw in their logic (vv. 17-18)

**But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul."**

How comforting that Jesus takes his stand right beside you and validates your healing as audiovisual evidence that God's kingdom has arrived in power. "Knowing their thoughts" is Luke's way of stressing the importance of Jesus' role as a prophet—one who brings to light hidden motives and exposes faulty logic. Jesus says that there is a fatal flaw in their thinking. Common sense tells us that a divided kingdom or house is doomed. If Beelzebul were the source behind Jesus' power to cast out demons, then Satan would be subverting his own dominion. It is absurd. Jesus then puts his accusers on the defensive with a stirring question.

### B. Ignoring massive evidence (v. 19)

**"And if I cast demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges."**

Jesus says, "I am not the only one casting out demons; 'your sons' are also casting them out. So who's power are they relying on?" Most commentators interpret "your sons" to be referring to Jewish exorcists of Jesus' time (Luke 9:49; Acts 19:13-14). If that is the case, then why has no one brought similar charges to them? Left unstated is the condemning implication, "And why aren't you engaged in this conflict with evil?"

An alternative view, which I find attractive, interprets "your sons" not as Jewish exorcists, but as Jesus' disciples (who are also Jewish). After Jesus sent out his seventy-two emissaries, they returned rejoicing saying "Lord even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Jesus responded that their success had cosmic significance: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:17-18).

There is massive evidence afoot that the powers of evil are being undone and overthrown at an unprecedented level. Are they blind? In this interpretation Jesus' representatives will be their judges, qualified by the authenticity of their own experience. Jesus later affirms that he will "assign to you...a kingdom... that you may...sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:30). Having completely cleared the air of his opponents' slanderous accusations, Jesus spells out the real significance of your deliverance.

## III. The Real Explanation (Luke 11:20-23)

### A. The New Exodus has arrived!

**But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. (vv. 20-22)**

Jesus attributes the source of his ability to cast out demons to be none other than "the finger of God." His claim is a bold one, for the phrase occurs only with reference to the Exodus, when God used all the forces of creation to decimate Pharaoh's oppressive kingdom in order to liberate his people. When the magicians in Egypt were

unable to duplicate all the miracles that Moses did, they said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Exod 8:19). Subsequently, when God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, they were written in stone by "the finger of God" (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10). Israel's prophets had described Israel's restoration after her exile in terms of a new and greater Exodus. Once again there will be a violent and direct confrontation against an oppressive enemy to rescue children who have been held captive. As the prophet Isaiah writes,

**Can the prey be taken from the mighty,  
or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?**

**For thus says the LORD:**

**"Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,  
and the prey of the tyrant be rescued,  
for I will contend with those who contend with you,  
and I will save your children." (Isa 49:24-25)**

The military image of a "strong man, fully armed," who "guards his own palace" keeping "his goods safe" was a reminder of Rome's oppressive rule. As Joel Green explains,

...the household mansions of local and regional Roman administrators would have invoked images of a retinue of armed soldiers signifying the institutionalization of foreign power and of a distribution system whereby material goods were siphoned off from the people. Such a strong man, occupying his "castle," can only be defeated by one who is yet stronger, but the whole Roman system worked to secure the perpetual, relative weakness of its conquered peoples. Who is more powerful than Rome?<sup>3</sup>

Satan has a palace and is heavily armed, and because he stands guard his possessions are safe. But now, one stronger than Satan has overpowered him and taken away his armor in which he trusted, and is dividing the spoil, establishing his sovereignty over the whole earth. The apostle Paul tells us that the spoils of victory are the manifestations of the Spirit that he gives to every believer to build up his body in love (Eph 4:7-8).

Jesus refuses to allow the crowd to dismiss your healed voice as insignificant. Everyone better stand up and take notice, for your deliverance from the demon is divine testimony that Satan's power has been broken and the year of Jubilee is at hand!

### B. Neutrality is not an option

**"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." (v. 23)**

Because Jesus' ministry represents the invasion of God's righteous rule confronting the forces of darkness worldwide, it is imperative that people align themselves for battle and choose whom they will serve. There is no neutrality in this war. You are either "with" Jesus or "against" him.

Jesus changes the imagery from a warrior in battle to that of a good shepherd who "gathers" his flock, in contrast to evil ones, who "scatter" the flock. Israel's prophets delivered scathing oracles to Israel's leadership for the abuse and abandonment of God's flock, so that without a shepherd "they became food for all the wild beasts... [and were] scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them" (Ezek 34:5-6). Because of this, God declares that he, himself, will rescue his sheep from Israel's leadership and will search and seek them out from all the places they have been scattered and bring them to good pasture land and feed them there. And he will "set up over them one shepherd, my servant David" (Ezek 34:23).

Jesus claims that your deliverance is further evidence that the day of God's rescue has arrived and that he is the new David to whom God entrusts the nurture and protection of his flock.

#### IV. Who's at Home in Your House? (Luke 11:24-26)

**"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first."**(vv.24-26)

Have you ever been listening to a sermon, and all of sudden you felt God was speaking directly to you? Up until now, Jesus has been addressing the skeptics in the crowd who dismissed the source of your healing as something evil. Jesus insists that your deliverance is the real deal, one with historic significance, as it marks the frontline advance of God's sovereign rule into satanic strongholds. But before you get a clean bill of health from the surgeon, he gives you his mandatory post-operative instructions. At first glance they seem rather odd, if not shocking. Luke Timothy Johnson comments,

Jesus' final saying on the exorcised demon who wanders and then returns is odd and perhaps intentionally humorous. The reader, in any case, cannot help but think of a disreputable lodger tossed out for non-payment of rent, wandering the streets for days, then returning and finding the building empty, clean and tidy, gathering seven of his seediest friends, and sitting with them in rumpled clothes, and stale cigars in an increasingly debris-filled front parlor. But the lesson is chilling: the last state of such a person is worse than the first.<sup>4</sup>

Deliverance is not the final word in our pilgrimage to freedom; it's just the beginning. The miracle gives you the freedom to choose, but choosing is your responsibility. It is a choice you cannot put off, for a clean and empty house is an attractive breeding ground for evil. For not only does the evil spirit come back reinforced with greater numbers, but they come to stay, to make your house their home ("dwell" – *katoikō* – "to settle down," "to make something a habitation by being there").

The only antidote is to make your house Christ's home. For in him "the whole fullness of deity *dwells* (*katoikeō*) bodily" (Col 2:9), and he will "*dwell* (*katoikeō*) in your heart through faith" (Eph 3:17). As believers we have every spiritual blessing necessary to overcome evil in our lives, for "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Pet 1:3). In football, the best defense is a great offense. So too, the only way to combat evil is to be a follower of Jesus, which means you must be engaged with the larger purposes of his kingdom—gathering a people from all corners of the world into a new community that demonstrates an authentic transformation of life his victory has made possible.

At this moment you need to pause and ask yourself, "Are there other occupants making themselves at home in my house besides Jesus?" Given what Christ has accomplished for you on the cross, you are "ridiculously in charge"<sup>5</sup> of what goes on in your "house." For as John asserts, "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Instead of calling them demons, what if you identify them as "sinful habits" that you have attempted to manage over time? The problem, however, is that sin cannot be managed. It

must be crucified. So are you willing to count the cost and follow Jesus?

#### IV. Are You Blessed? (Luke 11:27-28)

The fact that the man from whom the demon was driven out doesn't speak, suggests that Jesus is awaiting a response—from us! As the weight of Jesus' words press in upon you, a woman's voice swells with enthusiasm and breaks out into unabashed praise, pronouncing a blessing on Jesus' mother.

**As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!"** (v. 27)

You are relieved, at least temporarily, as Jesus' focus shifts to the outspoken woman. Her blessing sounds similar to the Spirit-inspired words of Elizabeth, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (1:42). I imagine Jesus is appreciative of her enthusiastic praise, but he doesn't let it go without correction:

**But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"** (v. 28)

Jesus explains that his mother can place no hope for divine favor based on the fertility of her womb. She was earlier blessed because of her obedience to the word of the Lord—"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This undercuts any notion of privileged position based on physical descent or the number of children one has, or even the success of our children. New values subvert old traditional values, making the playing field equal for all. Mary has no guarantee of future blessing unless she continues to hear and obey God's word. As N. T. Wright concludes, "When the word of God is at work, what is required is not applause but obedience."<sup>6</sup>

Suddenly the spotlight is back on you, now brighter than ever. Jesus' invitation to freedom is open to any and all who will hear his word and obey it. Will you join the heavenly chorus and "let freedom ring—free at last, free at last, free at last!"

**Say to those who have an anxious heart,**

**"Be strong; fear not!**

**Behold, your God**

**will come with vengeance,  
with the recompense of God.**

**He will come and save you."**

**Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,**

**and the ears of the deaf unstopped;**

**then shall the lame man leap like a deer,**

**and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.**

**And a highway shall be there,**

**and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;**

**And the ransomed of the Lord shall return**

**and come to Zion with singing;**

**everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;**

**they shall obtain gladness and joy,**

**and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.** (Isa 35:4-6a; 8a, 10)

**For freedom Christ set you free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.** (Gal 5:1)

1. “Transcript of Speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,” August 28, 1963. Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., <http://www.analytictech.com/mbo21/mlk.htm>.
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3; Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 183.
3. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 457-458.
4. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 184.
5. “Ridiculously in charge” was taken from the subtitle of a book by Dr. Henry Cloud, *Boundaries for Leaders* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013).
6. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 139.

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