

Seeing Greater Things: Authority Over Demons

Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" ²⁵ "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. ²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." ²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Jesus told Nathanael that he would see greater things than him seeing Nathanael under the fig tree before seeing him with his eyes. Last week, we saw the greater things of Jesus reading the hearts of the teachers of the law, the perfect healing of the paralyzed man, and - the greatest thing - forgiving that man's sins. We continue to see greater things from Jesus today.

"[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (verses 21-22) Maybe this is an often overlooked part of Jesus' ministry, but he was always in the synagogue, at church, week in and week out. He didn't skip. He did much of his teaching and preaching there instead of out in a field. As the people watched him teach, they were amazed, amazed because Jesus taught with authority. He wasn't uncertain of the things he was telling them. He didn't need to reference other rabbis or experts in the Scripture or scholarly commentaries. He knew the answer to every question, understood and explained teachings better than those with degrees without turning God's Word into some sort of spiritual honey-do list.

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" (verses 23-24) It's a demon in church, disrupting Jesus' teaching! This is crazy, right?! Demons are real!

Life is both physical and spiritual. We have physical bodies as well as the spiritual component – the soul or spirit. We can't see the spiritual, but God tells us we have it. So also we can't see the spiritual forces in our world. God is spirit and constantly working all things for our good. He uses his spiritual beings, the angels, to also accomplish his will and bring his message to us. But there are other spiritual beings who rebelled against God. Satan is the most notorious of those, the ringleader in the attempted coup in heaven. Other angels joined Satan in his rebellion. But when you go up against God, you lose. So Satan and the angels who followed him were cast out. Hell was specifically made for them to be locked in this prison away from God for all eternity. We call these rebellious angels cast out of heaven demons.

We honestly don't know how many demons exist because we don't know how many angels exist. The Bible tells us that the good angels number more than 10,000 x 10,000. Of that unspecified multitude, the book of Revelation describes in the rebellion that a third of the stars, or a third of the angels, in the sky were swept away by Satan, joined his cause. There are a lot of demons.

Being spiritual beings, demons have powers that we don't have, but we also don't exactly know all that they are capable of. From the Bible, we learn that they can tempt people to sin and fall away from God in both spoken and unspoken ways. We know that they can afflict suffering upon us, as God allows. They can make things happen that we can't explain – tell the future, show strength beyond that of a strong person, speak in unlearned foreign languages. They can, as we see here, possess people. Although not in the Bible, people attribute things like chairs moving, doors closing, pictures falling off walls to the disturbing work of demons.

Whatever demons do, they have one goal in mind: get people away from God. They want people to suffer as they have to suffer. They want people locked away in the prison of hell along with them. They will do whatever they can in order to make this happen.

A demon came to the synagogue, to church, that Sabbath. It, they (it might have been more than one), made its presence known. It didn't want people listening to Jesus, being amazed at his teaching. So, it interrupted. It tried to get people focused on anything or anyone other than Jesus, the Savior of the world.

That's pretty scary, but that wouldn't happen here, right? We don't have demons, do we? Do we think that this church building will protect us? If movies have taught us anything, then there has to be some sort of holy protection around us so that demons cannot step foot in here, that there are too many crosses which cause them to revile in pain at an object representing Christ. But we're not

in a movie. Just because we proclaim the Word of God here does not mean that the devil and the demons are not here right now. Although I've never seen a demon, I have met people who have claimed to have been disturbed by them and see them. One of them said that demons were here in this sanctuary. Honestly, I believe it. It makes sense. Demons don't need to lure people away from God who are already distracting and separating themselves from him and his Word. If demons really want to accomplish their goal to distract and drag people away from God and into hell, they're going to come to church where we are being filled with Christ.

Demons are real, and sometimes we talk about them in our lives. It's probably not possession like what was seen in Jesus' church on that day, but rather that we feel them trying to influence us to sin and distract us from God. Maybe demons in our lives take a much more familiar form like a bottle of alcohol that seems to be the solution to your problems by making you temporarily forget them. Or the anger that rises up and spews forth as I yell at my kids or my wife and berate them. Or the urge to click on that website and view those pictures that promise to give a euphoric experience played out in lustful fantasies. Or the highly educated voice that says the Bible has been and is easily proven false, that an all-powerful God doesn't exist because you can't see him. Anything that leads you to sin, distracts you from God, anything that does that – demon or not – is fulfilling the demons' goal. How can we fight them – especially as we can't necessarily see demons?

See first the greater thing for today. That demon possessed that man in the synagogue and had him shouting, taking people's attention away from Jesus and his words of eternal life. But Jesus didn't play around with this demon. He asserted his authority, the same authority that he had been teaching with. "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." (verses 25-27)

Using just his Word, Jesus shut this demon down, forced him to come out of the man. The demon was completely unable to resist Jesus. He couldn't operate independently of God made flesh. He had to obey God's Word and his authority. This demon knew the end game. He knew the prophecies and promises. He knew that Jesus was here to destroy him(them). The people in the synagogue that day and us have gotten to see another greater thing: Jesus' complete and total authority over all demons and their powers.

That same authoritative Word of God that forced that demon to come out of that man is the same Word of God that we gather around right here today. Yes, there probably are demons with us right now, but we have the authority of God on our side. We have God's powerful Word to protect us from demons. Jesus declared that, having been brought to faith in him, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. This means: No demons allowed! He has promised that no one, no angel, no demon, no spiritual force, no power in all of creation, is able to rip us away from him because he has total authority over them. We are protected. We are safe because we belong to God, brought under his protection when he put his name on us in baptism. No demon, not even Satan himself, can force you away from God.

In one of the stanzas of "A Mighty Fortress," Martin Luther wrote, "Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us, We tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him." (CW 200:3) There are demons all around us. That's not just uncomfortable; that's scary. They will afflict us. They will lie to us. They will try to raise such a ruckus in our lives so as to drown out the words of Jesus, distracting us from him, attempting to steal us away from him. With the authoritative Word of Jesus, we call out these demons and Satan as to who they really are: liars! They cannot overpower us. We are children of God. We belong to him and his powerful hands. God's Word always commands authority over every demon.

Because of Christ's authority over demons, the only way that we can be possessed by a demon is to give them a foothold in our lives. Thus, as temples of the Holy Spirit, we strive to recognize and see these demons. If there is a sin that I will not repent of, if I am holding on to anger and a grudge, if I am distracting and distancing myself from the authoritative Word of God, if I am dabbling in witchcraft, Ouija boards, satanic activities, in perpetuating lies against God – we avoid them. When demons whisper in our ears the solution to all our problems is found at the bottom of a bottle, that your anger and venting and rage is justifiable, that those explicit images will give you the pleasure you have been longing for, we come back to the authoritative word of Christ that we have seen today. We let Jesus fight this battle against our demons. "Be quiet! You lie! I, we belong to God. He has authority over you and will always protect us!" Jesus shows us the greater thing of his authority over demons. Amen.