

feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

March 19, 2013

Dear Church Family,

Luke 11:14-54 features Jesus responding to those in his day who won't accept that his ministry and teaching are from God. While some in the crowd hold that his power to cast out demons is coming from Satan, others ask for a sign from heaven to confirm his ministry. We have seen this theme of not accepting Jesus before in the rejection by his hometown of Nazareth and his conflict with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. And we observed that this was a problem for preaching the gospel to Gentiles. If Jesus is who he said he was, then why did a majority of the Jews not accept him, including the religious leaders who are the most knowledgeable in spiritual matters? Jesus is providing an answer to that question in this section.

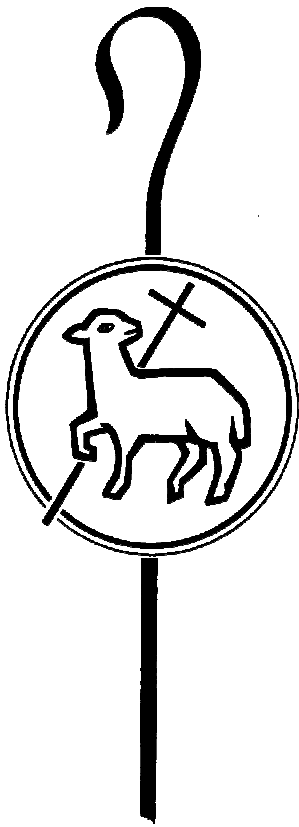
Jesus' response to the idea that he drives out demons with the power of Satan is to assert that if this were the case, then Satan would be opposing Satan. It is certainly possible for someone to perform miraculous works by the power of Satan. Although not in Luke, both Matthew and Mark record Jesus' warning of the last days, "*false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.*" This is essentially the accusation against Jesus that is occurring here. And since Jesus is clearly operating with supernatural power, his power must come from either God or Satan. Jesus emphasizes that if his power is from Satan, then

his opponents need to explain how the fruit of Jesus' ministry is serving the interests of Satan and is opposing God. (We have already seen in chapter 7 with the sinful woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee that the fruit of Jesus' outreach to sinners is a greater love and devotion for God.) If, however, Jesus' ministry is serving God and opposing Satan, what does that say about those who do not accept him? "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.*" Jesus is giving a warning to those who are not accepting him. With his talk about the strong man and the unclean spirit with seven other spirits, Jesus is warning that if people do not gather and align with him, they have no protector against the destructive forces of Satan in their lives. The brief exchange with the woman in the crowd emphasizes what constitutes gathering and allegiance to Jesus. It is not based on blood kinship but rather hearing the word and obeying it. Such allegiance is available to all.

Having dealt with the accusation that his power comes from Satan, Jesus addresses the request for a sign from heaven to establish God's approval. He identifies this request as coming from a wicked generation, so it is not a legitimate request from those who want to follow him and seek assurance. Instead, it comes from those who do not want to listen and obey him. The problem is not that Jesus did not provide enough signs from heaven to be convincing and justify the allegiance he was demanding. The men of Ninevah and the Queen of Sheba will rise up at the judgment and condemn this generation because they recognized and responded to God's word with far fewer confirming signs than Jesus has provided. The problem is that people did not want to see that Jesus was God's son.

In teaching on lamps and eyes and light and darkness, Jesus is saying that the problem of people not recognizing him is due to their inability to perceive, not the revelation that God has provided. And their eyes are not just faulty, they are wicked or evil (this is the same Greek word that identifies the seven evil spirits, the wicked generation and the Pharisees being full of wickedness), which means they are influenced or aligned with Satan. Paul develops this idea in 2 Cor 4:4, "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*"

In the following scene at the home of a Pharisee, Jesus exposes the religious leadership of the Pharisees and experts in the Law as prime examples of those who do not accept him because they are full of wickedness. Jesus' failure to wash his hands was not a trivial matter as clean hands were a symbol of a concern for holiness and



spiritual purity. Further, to not wash one's hands before a meal at the home a Pharisee would be insulting. The Pharisee notices this, but it is Jesus who addresses the concern. What follows is a devastating critique of the Pharisees. In his diatribe, Jesus goes way beyond all sense of propriety. Those in attendance must have been cringing and wondering why Jesus was being so offensive. I think we have a window into the judgment of a holy God against those who perceive themselves as his promoters and yet are actually opposing his purposes.

Jesus critiques the Pharisees as those who appear clean and pure on the outside, but inside are full of greed and wickedness. Their wickedness makes them a part of the wicked generation that does not accept Jesus. They neglect justice and the love of God because their religious devotion is actually not about serving God but themselves. Jesus reveals their motivation, "*you love the most important seats in the synagogue and greetings in the marketplace.*" The last line about unmarked graves is the most devastating. In Jewish tradition, the height of a concern for purity would be to avoid contact with dead bodies. The Pharisees consider themselves (and are considered by others) to be protectors of Israel's purity and holiness. Yet Jesus characterizes them as actually causing others to become impure. They are having the opposite effect that they think they are. This is the same criticism that Jesus directs against the experts in the Law. They would consider themselves to be those who are helping Israel to remain faithful to the Law, and therefore faithful to God. Jesus says that they are doing the opposite. They are not helping people but burdening them, making it more, not less, difficult for them to be faithful to God.

Jesus ends up being very harsh and judgmental in this scene. It is best to understand this as a warning. Jesus is so judgmental because judgment is coming. He is trying to warn those who oppose him about the consequences of their refusing to gather with him. He is giving the Pharisees and experts in the law, who considered themselves righteous and on God's side, a chance to repent by giving them a glimpse into how God sees them.

What can we glean for our own evangelism from Jesus addressing those in his day who are not accepting him? First we see that Jesus conducted his ministry and presents himself so that people need to make a decision about him. Do people today feel like they need to decide about Jesus one way or the other, or is he irrelevant? We need to be people who present the need to make a decision about Jesus. One way to do this is to live transparent lives so that they are able to see how important he is to our lives. Our devotion should confront them with the fact that they have decided to not follow Christ. In many cases, this has not been a conscious decision based on exploring the truth claims of Christ and Christianity. Perhaps our devotion might cause others to reexamine their own perspective on Jesus.

The teaching on lamps and eyes reminds us that evangelism is not simply a matter of presenting the gospel clearly. If the problem lies with how people perceive, we need to address that as well. Along with prayer, the dialoguing evangelism that Randy Newman has presented is helpful. So, evangelism becomes less of a matter of selling a really great product and more of a respectful inquiry to learn why someone has not chosen to follow Jesus.

Finally, I do not think we should see Jesus' exchange in the home of the Pharisee as a model for us to get really offensive and insulting. For one thing, we are not Jesus and do not have the insight to properly conduct such a confrontation (remember specks and planks from chapter 6). For another, the people we interact with are not like the Pharisees and experts in the Law in terms of their background or unique role in history. In fact, we are much more like these religious leaders than they are in terms of considering ourselves to be aligned with God. We should be sensitive that we too can get it wrong and need correction. And we can ask God to purify our motives so that our devotion is not for the praise of others but rather a love for God.

Pastorally yours,
Bo

<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)