

No One Like Jesus: Choose Your Kingdom

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Joshua 24:14-15; 2 Corinthians 1:18-20; Matthew 12:22-32

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 12:22-32. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.””

It's the time of year when we start acting like patriots again. We always love our country, but between Flag Day and the Fourth of July, we think a lot more about it. We hear the “Star Spangled Banner” and the “1812 Overture” and “Proud to Be an American,” they get the blood pumping, and we maybe get a little sentimental. I haven't traveled all over the world, but I've seen enough to know we live in a special place. We should thank God that we live where we do.

But most of the time, we don't think about being Americans. It just doesn't come up too often. For a few here that have Canadian roots, much of it still applies. We're proud of where we come from, wherever we come from, it's part of our identity, but our everyday lives don't seem all that affected by what we think about living in this country.

We also don't think about the fact that we're part of a kingdom. Having grown up in North America, it's hard to understand what it means to be the subject of a king. But there are two warring kingdoms at work in the spiritual realm. No one escapes being under their rule. And what kingdom we belong to makes all the difference for our eternity. Today we'll look at those two spiritual kingdoms and figure out why the kingdom you belong to is so very important.

Jesus is healing all the sick wherever He goes. He's gaining a reputation from the incredible miracles He does – a constant stream of good works. It is too good to be true; people can't believe it. It's as if someone had the winning lottery numbers every single day. They enjoy the benefits but they wonder, “Can this really be true?” They bring a man who is demon-possessed to Jesus, and as usual, He casts it out. Because the man can now speak and see, there's no denying he's been set free. The crowds question, “Is Jesus the messiah?” They can't think of any other explanation. He has supernatural power they can no longer deny. What else is left?

The Pharisees can't deny it either. But they hate Jesus and His attacks on their self-righteousness. They make the only play available to them – they say the power Jesus has is real, but it comes from the devil, rendering all Jesus' work satanic and ungodly. The prince of demons can give authority to someone to drive them out, they say, and that's where Jesus gets His power.

This is the point where we stop for a moment and get our first major point of the day: *there are two spiritual kingdoms at war with each other – the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil.* This is important because it's one thing on which both Jesus and the Pharisees agree. The debate is about who's on who's side, but it's not about this truth.

In 2009, a George Barna poll found that 40% of self-proclaimed Christians believe that the devil is a symbol of evil and not an actual being. 40%. These aren't atheists, agnostics, or people of other religions, but people who described themselves as Christians. It's easier to believe, especially if you don't want to believe in the supernatural. We suppose that the devil is scary, something out of a horror movie that makes it hard to sleep at night.

But the devil masquerades as an angel of light. We aren't scared of the devil and his minions when they do their work. We're fascinated by them, especially when we like the pleasures they offer us. We don't believe that they really exist not because we haven't seen what they do but because their existence gives weight to Scripture. If the devil exists, God also exists, and Scripture is true. We have an obligation to follow God. Even Jewish leaders that went about following God the wrong way knew the devil is real and they are supposed to be on God's side.

The second major thought is related: *there are two spiritual kingdoms, but they are not equal.* God's Kingdom always and eternally reigns supreme. There is nothing outside of God's purview. That means that while God is resisted by the devil and his followers, the power they have is only what is allowed to them by God.

Satan fights God, but he has no authority in and of himself. He tempts us, sets traps for us, and works against anything that has God's imprint on it. He is powerful. But Satan has no power to do anything to anyone who belongs to the Kingdom of God apart from what God decides is ultimately beneficial for our growth. The irony is that everything that Satan does to Christians around the world only works to strengthen us in faith, to make us more resistant to his schemes, and to mold us further into the image of our Father in Heaven.

In the story of Job, Satan is given the power to kill his family, to destroy everything he owns, and even to ravage Job with disease. Yet by the end of the story, Job has heard the voice of God. He is a man changed for the better despite the best efforts of the devil.

We look at the chaos, death, and disorder in our world and start to think that if there is a devilish kingdom, it must have a lot of power to create all the horrors and terrors we see. Yet none of it happens without God's allowance. God allows for our sinful disobedience to have natural consequences. Sometimes, those consequences are a disaster just for us, and sometimes they ripple across the world. Yet Satan's power is extremely limited. Satan cannot surprise God or do anything that God will not allow.

Jesus is living proof. He says a word and demons flee – often, demons that no human, even the faithful, were able to cast out. Everywhere He goes, the spiritual forces of darkness are powerless to resist Him. And when the Pharisees claim that Jesus does His work by the power of the devil, Jesus says, “That’s ludicrous!”

Civil war will destroy any nation. Think about how many nations around the world have split due to internal strife. The scars last for generations, centuries, millenia. We still hear the echoes of our civil war 150 years after it was fought. Jesus cannot be on Satan's side and casting out demons! It makes no sense. As Jesus points out, there are other Jewish exorcists. How do they do it? It's by the power of God.

Jesus says in John 10:10 that the thief, the devil, only comes in to steal, kill, and destroy, but He comes to give life, and life abundantly. All the possessed people Jesus healed had had life stolen from them; sight, hearing, speech, sanity. Jesus returned the gifts of God to them. Satan never releases a prisoner from his grip unless he has to by the compulsion of God. He wants to keep us in chains. But Jesus binds the strongman – He binds the power of the devil and his evil angels – and frees us. He releases us from the grip of sin, death, and hell, and frees us to serve the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom that has all true power.

The third point this afternoon is powerful and challenging: *we all belong to one of the two kingdoms*. If you were born in America, you're an American, like it or not. You might want to be an Englishman or Chinese or Portuguese, but if you born on American soil, you're an American. Everybody belongs somewhere, even if you're a refugee from a place you call home.

Maybe some of you remember the film *The Terminal* with Tom Hanks. It was a fictionalized account of a true story where a man's country went belly up during his flight to America. He couldn't go back, but he also couldn't come in. The flight terminal became his home. He was a man without a nation. Yet even he had a place - the international free zone in the airport. It wasn't a good place or a cheap place, but it was still a place.

Here's the bad news, as Jesus put it: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” We all start off in a kingdom, but it's the wrong kingdom. It's the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of darkness. Even if we're raised in a Christian home and baptized a couple of weeks after we're born and pledged by our parents to God's Kingdom, we still live with the reality that the kingdom of evil still has a hold on us. It doesn't have the grip on us that it does on those who have no clue about who God is or who are raised to disbelieve in Him or despise Him, but we aren't free of that kingdom.

Here's the good news, though: you can change nationalities. You can reject your kingdom of origin and join the Kingdom of God. If God is working in your life through the Holy Spirit, if He has implanted faith in you, you no longer have to serve under the rule of the prince of darkness. Instead, you can ask for God's forgiveness and entrance into God's Kingdom under His rule and reign. Many of us here have done that, but there's still more to be said about it.

I've been asked in the past, "How do I know if I'm really saved?" We don't believe that baptism saves you or taking the Lord's Supper. It's not even a question of saying a certain prayer, though we have to ask God for forgiveness. The question is, are you a part of God's Kingdom? Has He chosen you to enter? The signs include declaring your allegiance to Him, but also a desire to please Him and to do what is right in His sight. We aren't suddenly perfect; you still may struggle to read your Bible, you may swear or gossip or sin in other ways, but you are grieved when you sin and want to make it right. Your heart is changing to be more like His.

Just like being an American, most of us don't think about being a part of the kingdom of this world. That comes naturally. Selfishness, lust, anger, envy, strife, cruelty, revenge, all of these things attach to us easily. If you rarely or never think about being a part of the Kingdom of God, if the only time it comes up is on Sunday for a couple of hours, likelihood is, you aren't.

Kingdom citizens may not think about it in quite the same words, but God's children are conscious that they belong to Him, that He loves them, and that they want to please Him by serving others rather than themselves. They think about it often and pray about it regularly. They seek out more and more of God. We regularly engage in the means of grace. We worship Him both alone and together; we fellowship with other Christians; we pray; we dive into Scripture; we participate in communion. It takes more work to be a fully-functioning member of the Kingdom of God, but it is far, far more rewarding.

But the baseline of the two kingdoms is this: you belong to one or the other. There are no sidelines, no spectators, no bleacher seats. As Bob Dylan once sang, "You're gonna have to serve somebody...it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." Choose your kingdom. If you choose not to decide, you have made your choice.

The last bit in this passage has stirred up fear and controversy since the earliest days of the church. It's about the unpardonable sin – blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It's not abundantly clear what Jesus means, and unfortunately a lot of well-meaning preachers and teachers have tried to figure it out and made things a lot worse.

Some people have thought that destroying the image of God in a person blasphemes the Holy Spirit, so they considered murder unpardonable. Others have thought adultery, the breaking of a holy vow. But none of these things makes sense in the context of this passage. Jesus doesn't suddenly introduce a new idea. When He brings up the unpardonable sin, He mentions it in the context of the Spirit's work through His life.

Jesus has been healing and teaching and preaching and casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit given to Him by His Father. Everything He does is bathed in the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit came on Him at His baptism and has been empowering all His ministry. But the Pharisees say that Jesus' power comes from the devil. They see perfect goodness, kindness, grace and mercy and grace and attribute it to the most foul, ruthless, perverse creature imaginable. They aren't even like the crowds who are baffled, questioning if this might be the Messiah. They are convinced that Jesus is acting, in the Holy Spirit's power, against the Kingdom of God.

That's what Jesus warns about. The Pharisees are dangerously close to committing this unforgivable sin. They are not just calling evil good and good evil. They are defaming the Holy Spirit by which Jesus works His miracles. It's questionable whether or not anyone today can even commit this sin, since we have never seen Jesus do miracles by the Holy Spirit in the flesh. But to plainly see the work of the Holy Spirit in front of you, to know what it is, and to denounce it – that is blasphemy that threatens to cross the line.

Sometimes, Christians wonder if they've committed the unpardonable sin. I sincerely doubt that anyone who has committed the sin would be worried about it. To commit that flagrant a sin would be to deny the clear power of God – no one could do that if they had been called by God. However, it does lead to our final thought about the two kingdoms today: *make room for the Holy Spirit's work*. The Holy Spirit is alive and well and active in our world today, changing hearts, convicting us of sin, leading us to our Savior, and making us more like Him.

There are times when people do the miraculous. I'm much more convinced when the miraculous occurs when a previously unreached culture is given the good news of Jesus for the first time. Those miracles are a sign that God is at work for those who don't yet believe.

I'm rarely convinced by televangelists who promise healing if you touch the TV and send in \$50. Yet even then, I give the Spirit room to work. The greedy person on the other side of the camera means little. God blesses those who trust in Him. If someone is healed after trusting that God could touch their body after hearing a TV preacher, I don't attribute that healing to the power of the televangelist; I attribute it to the power of the Holy Spirit who works as He will.

We need to give the Holy Spirit room to work in our own lives, too. Often, we accept the gift of salvation from Jesus but stop short of believing all He told us He would do through the Holy Spirit. We discount that the Spirit could free us from an addiction, that the Spirit could change our mouths to stop using foul language, to rid us of gossip and evil thoughts towards others. We don't blaspheme the Spirit, but we don't give Him the credit He is due.

He is the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit of the Father and Son who works in perfect harmony and union with them. He lives inside of us as believers! Don't ever say, "Well, I'm saved, but I don't expect much will be different in my life." Everything is different! You are guided by a new conscience, a godly conscience. You have the counselor of the Kingdom of God with you. Give Him the love and respect He deserves, and expect that He will do what He has promised to do by making you holy.

God's Kingdom is in our midst. It has already overcome the kingdom of this world, of darkness and destruction. If you belong to God's Kingdom, rejoice in that fact and ask the Spirit to work in you more and more that you would reflect the beauty of God more and more each day. And if you're not sure where you stand, pray about it today. Don't miss out on becoming a part of the only Kingdom worth serving.