

No Switzerlands in *this* War

Luke: Certainty of the Truth

Luke 11:14-36

Pastor Mike Andrus

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I read the story of a seminary student who submitted his sermon to his homiletics professor. The professor said his exegesis was good and his three points made sense, but he was concerned about the sermon title. “It’s one of the worst I’ve ever seen. Nobody will want to come to hear a sermon entitled: ‘The Pericopes of Jesus in Relationship to the Eschatology of the Apostle Paul.’ See if you can come up with a better sermon title by tomorrow and I’ll consider giving you a better grade. What you want is a title that will reach out and grab people by the heart, one that will compel them to come and hear what you have to say. Imagine the title out on the sign in front of a church building. It should have such impact that if a bus stopped in front of the church and the people on the bus saw the sign, it would be so powerful they would immediately get off the bus and run into the church.”

Well, the seminarian gave it his best shot. He went home and wrestled with it all night, sweating bullets. The next morning he showed up at the professor’s office and handed him the new sermon title: “Your Bus Has a Bomb on It!” Well, the title I have chosen today is not quite in that category, but I have tried to at least make you think a little. No doubt you are aware that Switzerland has always prided itself on its neutrality. The Swiss have been satisfied to let others fight the Nazis, the Communists and the Jihadists who have threatened them and their neighbors, and because they are small and relatively insignificant they seem to get by with it. In our Scripture text today we are going to hear about a war, a spiritual battle, in which Jesus says, in effect, there can be no Switzerlands, no neutrality.¹ You’re either all in or all out.

Will you stand with me, if you are able, as we read Luke 11:14-32:

Luke 11:14-32²

¹⁴Now he was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. ¹⁵But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons,” ¹⁶while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. ¹⁷But he, knowing their thoughts, said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. ¹⁸And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁰But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; ²²but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. ²³Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

²⁴“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.’ ²⁵And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. ²⁶Then 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.”

¹ Bock, Darrell L. Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1994.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

²⁷As 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!” ²⁸But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”

²⁹When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. ³¹The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. ³²The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

This is the Word of the Lord.

AN ASTONISHING MIRACLE PRODUCES THREE DIFFERENT REACTIONS (14-16)

In verse 14 Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man unable to speak. Matthew adds (12:22) that he is also blind. Jesus heals the man, casting out the demon which was causing his disabilities, enabling him to both see and talk. There is no doubt that a stupendous miracle has occurred. Jesus’ opponents do not even try to dismiss it as some kind of hoax, for that is not an option. The only question is by whose authority and power Jesus did it. The response is mixed.

The crowd is amazed at the miracle. (14) They are astonished at the power they have just witnessed. Matthew tells us that the question on many people’s lips is, “Could this be the Son of David?” So at least some are so impressed by what they have seen that they are seriously considering that Jesus might be the long-awaited Messiah.

But there is a second group, whom Matthew (12:24) identifies as Pharisees.

The Pharisees ascribe the miracle to Satanic power. (15) They say, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.” Supernatural power has two possible sources—God is one and Satan is the other. The Pharisees opt for the latter, because if they admit that God’s power is involved they will have to acknowledge that Jesus is from God, and this they are unwilling to do. Instead they claim the healing has been done by the power of Beelzebul. In the first century this was the everyday term used by Jews to refer to Satan.

Now, Satan’s power is delegated but it is also very real. Anyone who denies the existence of Satan or his power is making a very foolish mistake. He has the power to bring spiritual blindness upon millions of people, causing them to believe a false religious system, and believe it so fanatically that they are even willing to commit suicide in its service. Satan also has the power to perform miracles, as evident in Moses’ day when the early plagues were imitated by Pharaoh’s magicians.

But Satan’s miracle-working power is not unlimited. The same magicians hit a wall when the plagues increased in intensity. Clearly there are some things Satan cannot imitate and some things his power cannot accomplish. But the Pharisees ignore those limitations with their claim that Jesus has done this amazing miracle by the power of Satan.

There is a third group who decline to choose between God’s power and Satan’s.

Others test Jesus, asking for a sign from heaven. (16) Now mind you Jesus has just healed a man who was demon-possessed, blind, and mute. But they have the nerve to ask for a sign from heaven. What is this all about? I wonder if they aren’t saying, “Maybe you can do miracles here on

earth, but we want to see you do a miracle in the heavens—perhaps a strange alignment of stars, an eclipse, or maybe turning the moon into blood (as predicted by the OT prophet Joel (2:31)); then maybe we'll accept you as Messiah.”³

At any rate, this group wants further proof before deciding whether Jesus' power is Satanic or divine. He will address their concerns in verse 29, but first . . .

JESUS RESPONDS TO THE PHARISEES' CHARGE THAT HE DID THIS MIRACLE BY THE POWER OF SATAN. (17-28)

As often the case, the Pharisees keep their deliberations to themselves, but Jesus has no problem reading their thoughts. He speaks directly to them and devastates their claim by examining the two alternatives.

What if by Satan? (17-19) Well, Jesus argues, that would be logically absurd. The Pharisees have already acknowledged that a demon has been cast out of the man. But for whom do demons work? Satan! If Satan is driving out his own demons, how can he win the spiritual battle that way? And why would he do such a thing? Satan is the most intelligent being in the universe apart from God. He certainly would not assign his own forces to fight against each other. Civil war at any level, even among spiritual beings, is counterproductive and devastating.⁴

Abraham Lincoln borrowed Jesus' statement that “A house divided against itself cannot stand,” in a brief speech when he unsuccessfully ran for the Senate against Stephen A. Douglas. He used it to convey his belief that the union could never survive with both free and slave states; the nation would have to opt for one or the other. But when Jesus first spoke those words he was not speaking simply of a political and moral issue dividing a particular country at a point of history; rather he was speaking of a tremendous spiritual divide that confronts every individual of all time. And he contends that one must opt for one side or the other; there is no neutrality possible in this spiritual battle.

Furthermore, Jesus argues, “if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out”? Most religions recognize demons as a reality, and most have some form of exorcism, whether real or phony—the Pharisees certainly practiced it. So Jesus turns the tables on them: “You approve of your own exorcisms, however questionable they might be. Yet when I not only cast out a demon but also heal the same man of the maladies caused by that possession, you accuse me of being in league with the devil. If my exorcism is Satanic, yours must be all the more so.” Of course, there is another option as to the source of Jesus' miracle.

What if by God? (20-22) If Jesus is driving out demons “by the finger of God” (it doesn't even require God to use his arm; just his little finger is enough!), then they'd better sit up and take notice, because it means Messiah is here and the kingdom of God has come upon them. The mention of the finger of God here is certainly intended to recall the magicians of Pharaoh, who recognized that the power of God was greater than the Satanic power they possessed. Eventually they threw up their hands and said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” (Exodus 8:19)

Jesus then forcefully drives home the point that his power comes from God and no one else by means of a little parable in verse 21-22. He speaks of a strong man, fully armed, guarding his house.

³ In fact, in a very similar passage in Matthew 16 (1-4), that seems to be the meaning of “sign.”

⁴ Bock

The “strong man” seems to be a designation for Satan. His “house” is his sphere of influence, in this case a blind, mute man whom Satan’s demons had possessed. The only way he can be rescued is for someone stronger to attack and overpower Satan, seize his weapons and release the man, which is exactly what he, Jesus, has done. Their claim, then, that he has done this by Satan’s power simply makes no sense.

But Jesus not only responds by examining the alternatives; he also responds by offering three powerful spiritual applications. (23-28)

There are only two sides in the spiritual battle. (23) “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever who does not gather with me, scatters.” A lot of people today want a third option. They claim they are agnostic, they haven’t made up their minds, or they need more evidence. But one cannot be neutral about Jesus. One must choose sides, and refusing to choose is itself a choice—it’s a choice against him.⁵

Reformation is not the same as regeneration. (24-26) The Pharisees were all about reformation, making bad people good and good people better. They had a list of religious rules a mile long—all designed to curb the excesses of human behavior. Even their exorcisms were designed to help a person clean up his act and live a normal life. Jesus has a totally different purpose. When he performs an exorcism, the ultimate purpose is to draw the person (and the people who witness it) to himself, to regenerate them and to give them new life!

In verses 24-26 we have a strange story about a man who has an evil spirit (a demon) but the demon leaves. Now there’s a lot we don’t know here, but I think from the context it’s safe to surmise that this man has experienced some sort of exorcism rite, probably by one of the Pharisees. The passage tells us this about the man: he is “swept and put in order.” This indicates that the exorcism has succeeded in getting rid of a number of symptoms, perhaps bad habits and addictions, and it has produced a distinct improvement in the man’s behavior and appearance. But then the demon returns and brings with him seven other demons worse than himself. And the final condition of the man is worse than it was originally. What is the point?

I think Jesus is saying that exorcism cannot be a goal in and of itself. Exorcism is a means to an end. Its purpose is to drive out evil so that truth and righteousness might take its place. An empty tenement just invites squatters. Another analogy might be that when you delete data from a computer hard drive, the deleted data is still there, in some form, and it can be fully erased only by overwriting it with new data. The place in one’s life once controlled by demonic forces must be *overwritten* by Jesus and the gospel or one’s life is not secure from the return of a fatal virus.⁶ Paul shouts in Romans 7:24-25, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Then he answers his own question: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Friends, here is the question we must wrestle with: Is it ultimately any advantage to enter a Christless eternity sober rather than drunk, generous rather than greedy, celibate rather than promiscuous, clothed and in your right mind rather than naked and foaming at the mouth? Is a reformed sinner any better off in hell than an unreformed one? I don’t mean to say that there’s no reason to be

⁵ By the way, you may be aware that on another occasion Jesus seems to say the opposite. In Luke 9:50 he tells his disciples, when they try to shut down a free-lance exorcist, “Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you.” But even though the words used are very different, the ultimate point is the same: there are only two sides in the spiritual battle. We must be careful not to be too inclusive (thus, “he who is not with me is against me”) but we must also not be too exclusive (thus, “whoever is not against you is for you”).

⁶ Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke*. The pillar New Testament commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2015.

pleased when someone reforms his behavior. They're surely more pleasant to be around, they make better neighbors, they stop hurting the people who love them. That's all great, but man's dreadful sinful condition can't be healed by a little moral tidying up. In fact, there is a very real sense in which a reformed person without God can actually be worse off than an unreformed person—because at least the latter knows he's messed up and can't save himself, while the former is often proud of the progress he has made on his own. John MacArthur writes cogently: “Jesus had little trouble reaching prostitutes, thieves, extortioners, murderers, and the outcasts of society. But he had an almost impossible time reaching religious and moral people who were under the delusion that outward propriety made them acceptable to God.”⁷

The fact is, there has probably never been a group more committed to a demanding religious and moral code than the Pharisees, and there has never been a group so far from God.

It is not one's physical relationship to Jesus that is important but one's attitude to God's

Word. (27-28) As Jesus is speaking, a woman in the crowd erupts with a spontaneous exclamation: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.” It almost sounds like a Hail Mary! I'm not sure what is in this woman's mind or what her motivation is. Perhaps she just wants to break the tension produced by the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, but let's give her the benefit of the doubt. Let's suppose she is overwhelmed by how wonderful it must be to have a son like Jesus, so she pronounces a blessing on the one who brought him into the world and nursed him.

Please notice that Jesus does not reject the woman or criticize her. I can actually see him smiling at her and doing what a great teacher always tries to do when one of his students gives an inane answer to a question. He tries to find something he can affirm and then skillfully turns the conversation in a better direction. The woman has said one thing right—“blessed”—and Jesus picks up on that: “Ah, blessed indeed, but rather than focusing on my mother, let's focus on those who are the most blessed—those who hear the Word of God and obey it.” The little word “rather” in Greek “does not question the truth of the preceding statement, but emphasizes the greater relevance of what follows.”⁸ What really made Mary herself blessed is not the fertility of her womb but the fact that she listened to God's Word when Gabriel brought it to her and acted upon it: “May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:38).

How does this little vignette fit into the argument between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the source of Jesus' power? It shines a strong light on the fact that the Pharisees themselves are refusing to listen to the Word of God and obey it.

Now in verse 29 Jesus turns his attention to the group who requested a sign from heaven (remember that from verse 16?).

JESUS RESPONDS TO THE REQUEST FOR A SIGN FROM HEAVEN. (29-32)

He asserts that a thirst for signs and wonders is indicative of wickedness rather than faith.

The demand for a sign would seem, on the surface, to be less antagonistic than the accusation that Jesus did his miracles by the power of Satan, but in the context it is no less offensive. What is perfectly clear is that these individuals are not seeking a miraculous sign for any noble purpose but

⁷ MacArthur, John. *Matthew 8-15*. The MacArthur New Testament commentary. Chicago, Ill: Moody Press, 1987.

⁸ Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament commentaries. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002.

only in order to test Jesus and trip him up. In fact, the tense of the verb in verse 16, “kept seeking,” suggests a running quest for proof that will never be satisfied that it has enough evidence to make a commitment.⁹

In his response to them Jesus reveals that God doesn’t do miracles to tickle the fancy of religious skeptics or thrill seekers. He does not coerce faith with irresistible proof, nor does he submit to human demands for verification.¹⁰ People often imagine they would believe in Jesus if they saw the kind of miracles he performed when here on earth, but frankly this very account is evidence that undisputed miracles do not necessarily produce faith. The problem with most skeptics is not a lack of evidence but rather a Satanic blindness to the truth. They do not have true intellectual problems with the gospel; they have moral problems with it; they don’t want God telling them how to live.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, the rich man dies and in the afterlife is desperate to have his brothers, still living, spared the torment he is experiencing. He begs God to send Lazarus to warn them not to join him in Hades, but Jesus says, “if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” And, sure enough, when a few months later someone did rise from the dead, namely Jesus Himself, they remained unconvinced and even became hardened in their opposition to Jesus’ followers. I strongly suspect the same would be true today.

You have heard me say before that miracles have never been common. In fact, by definition they cannot be common because if they were they wouldn’t be miracles! There were only three great periods of miracle even in biblical times—the time of Moses, the period of the great OT prophets, and the time of Jesus and the Apostles. There were few, if any, miracles during the time of the Patriarchs, or during David and Solomon’s time, or in the post-exilic period. And miracles were not even that common when Jesus and the disciples were ministering. The impression I get from the gospels is that Jesus rarely did miracles out in the public square, especially around the skeptics. They were more often used to reward faith than to generate it. I suspect the average person in Israel never saw a miracle.

By the same token, I don’t think we should be surprised and disappointed that we don’t see more miracles today, especially here in the western world, with its skepticism and agnosticism about spiritual things. But many today crave signs and wonders. I’m not talking about the parents who pray for a miracle for a sick child. I’m talking about spiritual thrill seekers who by the tens of thousands avidly follow the likes of Benny Hinn, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer and Bill Johnson, and are paid off with highly questionable miracles and theological heresy, like health-wealth baloney. Jesus clearly does not consider the pursuit of signs and wonders a legitimate search for truth. It is not an indication of faith, it is more likely an indication of evil motives. People should put their trust in God and not in some miraculous divine activity.

The only sign he promises is the sign of Jonah. “For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.” Jesus’ audience and the Ninevites both received a message from God, and their response to that message is the issue at hand. But there is probably more to the sign than simply a message, and Matthew’s account adds this important fact: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Jesus is ultimately speaking of the

⁹ Garland, David E. *Luke*. Zondervan exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011.

¹⁰ Garland

sign of the resurrection, for just as Jonah didn't stay in the belly of the fish, neither did Jesus stay in the tomb. This is the only sign Jesus promises to the skeptics.

He warns that his challengers will be condemned by pagans at the Judgment. Jesus' comparison of himself to Jonah as a messenger of God must have cut like a knife, but now Jesus twists the knife by telling these religious thrill-seekers that they will be condemned by pagans. Verse 32: "The men of Ninevah will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it." You can't imagine how this must have angered these orthodox Jews!

Think back to the Jonah story and how at first he refused to go to Ninevah and preach God's judgment. His excuse was that God is too merciful. He knew God would forgive them if the Ninevites repented, and he didn't want them spared. But after the very unpleasant experience of being swallowed by a great fish, Jonah decided that obedience was the wiser path, and he went and preached. Sure enough, Ninevah repented; sure enough God spared them. Here's Jesus' point: If pagan Ninevah repented after hearing a simple message of judgment from a foreign prophet, who actually hated them and performed no miracles in their presence, how much more should this generation repent when God has sent them "something [someone] greater than Jonah," his very Son, who loved them and did stunning miracles before their very eyes.

But if Jonah is not a sufficient witness, Jesus appeals to a second, even more telling witness. He says in verse 31, "The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and behold something [someone] greater than Solomon is here." The reference here is undoubtedly to the Queen of Sheba, whose visit to Solomon is talked about in 1 Kings 10:1-13. She was a Gentile and a woman and a pagan (3 strikes and you're out!), and she lived at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, modern day Yemen (which seemed like the end of the earth to Jews of that day). But she was attracted to God's wisdom and came to pay homage to his servant Solomon. Jesus contrasts her actions with those of the rebellious Jews who are rejecting him even though he is far greater than Solomon and they didn't even have to travel beyond their home towns to hear his wisdom.

JESUS OFFERS A DISCOURSE ON LAMPS AND LIGHT. (33-36)

Luke 11:33-36

³³"No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar or under a basket, but on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. ³⁴Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness. ³⁵Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. ³⁶If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."

This short discourse is not easy to understand, but hopefully I can help by means of three simple propositions:

1. The function of light is to illuminate.
2. The function of the eye is to receive light.
3. What is needed is not more light but better eyesight.

Let's take these one by one.

The function of light is to illuminate. It was not easy to light an oil lamp in those days. There were no light switches to flip. It was more like starting a campfire with flint. No one would go to all that trouble and then put the lamp in a place where it would not illuminate.

The function of the eye is to receive light. Your eye is like a light to your body. If your eye is healthy and lets in plenty of light, your whole body benefits. You're going to see the beauty around you, you're not going to trip over objects, you're going to be able to read and understand truth, etc. But if you have cataracts or macular degeneration or a detached retina, your eyes don't let in sufficient light, your whole life suffers. The opposite of the positive benefits I just mentioned will be true of you.

What is needed is not more light but better eyesight. Jesus makes it clear that he is speaking metaphorically and spiritually. "Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness." Obviously we do not always have control over our physical eyes. But spiritually speaking we are responsible for what our eyes take in, and he places the responsibility squarely on our shoulders to bask in the light. Light ignored results in darkness, and the darkness can become so thick that it results in blindness. A popular expression has it that one "goes over to the dark side." 2 Cor. 4:4 puts it this way: "The god of this age (that's Satan) has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

The issue in the Gospel of Luke is what do we do with the truth we hear? What do we do with Jesus' call to follow? There is no neutral ground. There is no Switzerland to emigrate to. Voices are telling us that there are many routes to God and it makes little difference which one you choose, but Jesus doesn't give us that option. We are either on the way or in the way.

Conclusion

It's possible to carry away from this message a sense of fear, either for yourself or for some loved one. And that's okay, for there is such a thing as healthy fear. John MacArthur tells the story of an American naval force in the North Atlantic during WWII, which was engaged in heavy battle with enemy ships and submarines on an exceptionally dark night. Six planes took off from the carrier to search out those targets, but while they were in the air an eminent threat caused the captain to order a total blackout for the carrier in order to protect it from attack. Without lights on the carrier's deck the six planes could not possibly land, and they made a radio request for the lights to be turned on just long enough for them to come in. But because the entire carrier, with its several thousand men as well as all the other planes and equipment, would have been vulnerable, no lights were permitted. When the six planes ran out of fuel, they had to ditch in the freezing water and all the crew members perished.¹¹

There comes a time when God turns out the lights, when further opportunity for salvation is forever lost.

But fear is not the only reaction one can take from this passage. What I most want you to carry away is the hope and confidence that forgiveness of sins and eternal life is yours today if you will receive it! Jesus came with the power and authority of God. He performed some amazing miracles, like this one in Luke 11. His purpose was not to stun an audience but to demonstrate his power and authority over sin. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

There is only one requirement to receive God's forgiveness and the eternal life that accompanies it—and it's not keeping the Ten Commandments, or being baptized, or joining the church, or any other rite or ritual, human or divine. It's the simple requirement to believe, to put your faith in Jesus.

¹¹ MacArthur

Ephesians 2:8-9 states the issue clearly: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast.”

But we must understand that faith is not a passive word but an active one. It’s not just giving mental assent to the fact that Jesus lived a perfect life, died a martyr’s death, and then rose from the dead. But it’s giving one’s whole self to Christ. It means rejecting the myth of neutrality. It means agreeing with God in heart, soul, and mind that we are indeed sinners and Jesus is our only hope.