



Overcoming Presumption

Luke 11:14-36

Grace Waco | 6.9.24

The appropriate context for this difficult passage about demons and lamps and such is found right before it, in **11:13**, as Jesus explains the heart of prayer. His point is very simple: even evil fathers do some good for their children. If God is the antithesis of evil, then he is ready to do all sorts of good for his children who ask.

What Jesus is teaching us through the Lord's prayer, as Dave pointed out last week, is how to relate to God. When we relate to anyone, we bring our presumptions to the table. We speak to our spouse differently than anyone else, assuming love and covenant. We speak to friends differently than strangers, assuming devotion and shared interest. So when we come to God, we approach him as a loving Father—and that changes the way we relate to him. Our presumption about God should be that he has our best interests in mind, that he desires to give us good things, that in fact he is ready and eager to answer our requests when we ask him.

But in our passage we find the crowds making a totally different presumption. Jesus casts out a demon, showing his authority and power in the spiritual realm, genuinely helping a man who is mute. But some people are skeptical. Unwilling to take Jesus at his word, they presume that his power comes not from God, but from Satan—here called “Beelzebub”, an ancient name for Satan as the “prince of demons”. In their presumption, they attribute the mercy of God to an evil motive, and what they have done, whether they know it or not, is actually associate with Satan.

Now, not all of us outwardly attribute the work of God to the work of Satan (although there are plenty in the world who do), but we are very susceptible to desire confirmative signs from Jesus, to hold the trigger on following him into that sacrifice, that change of lifestyle, that hard conversation, until he shows us a bit more. And notice how Jesus lumps them both together, the accusers and the skeptics. Both are acting like Satan. Satan is the first one to attribute the grace of God to the work of evil, to confuse light with darkness, when in the garden he tricks Adam and Eve into believing that the law meant for their good was really meant for their evil. And Satan is the one who, like the unbelieving crowds in **verse 16**, tests Jesus in the wilderness, asking for a sign to prove he is who he says he is.

The crowds saw a display of merciful power for a mute man, and instead of attributing it to God, attribute it to Satan. Why? Because they have trouble taking Jesus at face value. They see power, they see change, but what Jesus says is that if he casts out by the power of God, then “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (**verse 20**). And that is too much to believe. The stakes are too high. They would rather have a Jesus they can tame than a Jesus who is Lord.

Like the crowds, we have trouble taking Jesus at face value. We want to explain away his power and authority to meet our own presumptions of what Jesus should be like. When he doesn't fit in those boxes, then there is trouble. It's a matter of downplaying the seriousness of Jesus.

Legend has it that Picasso was at a Paris market when an admirer approached and asked if he could do a quick sketch on a paper napkin for her. Picasso politely agreed, promptly created a drawing, and handed back the napkin – but not before asking for a million Francs.

The lady was shocked: “How can you ask for so much? It took you five minutes to draw this!” “No”, Picasso replied, “It took me 40 years to draw this in five minutes.”

Similarly to the woman in this story, we desire the goodness of Jesus, but we downplay the seriousness of Jesus. We forget that for us to be able to ask good things of the Father and receive them cost Jesus his very life. It wasn't cheap.

The seriousness of Jesus means that following Jesus is not a neutral affair. The stakes are reiterated several times in this passage. In **verse 23**, Jesus makes it clear. And in **verses 27-28** we hear a reiteration of Jesus' teaching earlier in Luke: following him is about hearing and doing. There is no neutrality. We either take Jesus for who he is, or we take up arms against Jesus with Satan.

What this is sometimes called is wanting the kingdom without the king. We like the good things Jesus brings: justice, brotherly love, forgiveness, acceptance, deliverance, flourishing. But Jesus is a little too square. His views on sex are regressive. He asks a little too much. He doesn't understand the modern world we live in. And what Jesus compares it to, in **verses 33-36**, is spiritual darkness. In this comparison, Jesus is the lamp shining in the darkness. Whether or not we see Jesus rightly or not depends on our own eyesight, our own “lamp”. In order to light up, we need the “lamp with its rays to give us light”. The point is very simple: if we miss Jesus, we miss it all. We can't have true spiritual light without the light of the world. We can't have the kingdom without the king. If we get our presumptions about Jesus wrong, we don't just miss out on some Christian niceties, we stay in darkness.

So I do you a huge disservice if I sugarcoat any of this. I can't let myself or any of you off the hook. Following Jesus is deathly serious. If you get him wrong, you are not a neutral bystander—you are opposed to him. Religious plurality will tell us: if it works for you, then that is great. You do your own thing. But truth is a zero sum game. Either God is on his throne, or he isn't it. Either Jesus is the way to God, or he isn't. Either the kingdom of God is upon us, or it isn't.

We are either in the light, or in the darkness. Either you follow Jesus, or you take up arms against him. Either Jesus is Lord, or Satan is.

How then do we get on the side of Jesus? We learn to take him at his word—with eyes of faith, to see him as he is—and to rid ourselves of our presumptuous attempts to make him how we want to make him. Let's look at two of those presumptions now.

1. We presume Jesus is one power among many (downplaying the power of Jesus).

Look at how Jesus answers the accusations thrown at him. First of all, he knows their thoughts in **verse 17**. That alone should be enough to hint that Jesus is totally different from everyone else. But how Jesus answers is unique. Instead of appealing to his reasoning, he appeals to Satan's reasoning. What would Satan have to gain by casting out his own demons? Again, Jesus is pointing to the reality of his power. Satan doesn't have the luxury of fighting against himself.

The second reasoning Jesus uses is even more interesting. There is good historical evidence that Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders practiced exorcisms. They had real power over evil—and so Jesus called upon them to be the judges. If his power comes from Satan, so shouldn't theirs?

What Jesus understands is that due to the common grace of God, evil is contained in the world. God is continually holding back the tide of both his wrath against sin and the influence of Satan, demons, and evil, for all people in many ways. There are many ways to fight against evil in the world, many of them appear to work, sometimes quite well.

You can go to a therapist and receive real help from some of the problems besetting you. You can take medicine to counteract the physical effects of the fall. You can exercise and become a healthier moth physically and emotionally. One of the popular trends right now, particularly among young men, is a kind of neo-stoicism that calls for a kind of indifference to pleasure and pain and an acceptance of reality as a way to self-control. You can be motivated by all sorts of external pressures to perform well for your family, to uphold your own honor, even motivated by your own feelings of guilt for past mistakes, or motivated towards change in your life by the desire for wealth and status. Our world is full of ways to "improve yourself". And many times, it is effective in the short term. Even the Pharisees cast out demons—it doesn't mean they were calling on the power of Satan to do so.

But again, there are only two sides of the coin. Going to the gym and the doctor and sorting out your emotions with a therapist might be common grace, but the moment that it supplants the power of Jesus instead of points to it, the moment that your own self-improvement, your own power to change, your own effort, becomes just another way *alongside* Jesus, you've set yourself up against Jesus. This is Jesus' point in **24-26**.

Demons are not scared by a life that is clean on the outside. They are not afraid of someone who has picked themselves up through hard work, dusted themselves off, gone to a therapist and lost some weight. An empty house is a life that has worked hard to expel what is evil and dark, but never filled their life with what is true and good, namely Jesus Christ. It's an exercise in futility—because evil will come roaring back even stronger. The ones who are most susceptible to falling into darkness are not those who are poor and needy and know it, but those who believe themselves to be strong and powerful.

Any moral reform that creates a mere vacuum will be filled by evils worse than before. Escape from evil is not found in neutrality, not even in well-manicured neutrality; our only safety lies in welcoming and revering and rejoicing in the kingdom of God coming upon us in divine power.¹

Whatever power you received from self is an illusion that Satan uses to overcome you. The scariest thing about self-help is that it works, until it doesn't. The reason prosperity preachers are wolves in sheep's clothing is not because they promise people power to change, but because the power to change comes from within, not without. They are sweeping and cleaning the house, preparing hearts for an even greater fall. Satan is stronger than your financial security, your self will, your good works, whatever you use to get your life in order.

But Jesus is stronger than Satan.

The presumption we must make is not Jesus is one power among many, but that he is the stronger man who breaks into the house of Satan, the strong man, and overcomes him. The presumption we must make is that without Jesus' power, all other power to change means nothing, and is just playing with fire. But with Jesus, we are safe and all things belong to us: the spoils and enjoyments of eternal life. What is offered in the gospel is not just power over evil, but to be with Jesus.

2. We presume we don't need Jesus (downplaying the necessity of Jesus).

Notice in **verse 16**, there are two kinds of opposition to Jesus. One attributes his mercy to demonic activity, and the other demands a sign of God. What does it mean that the people are asking for a "sign"? The idea is that they want proof that Jesus is really what they are looking for. They are skeptical of him, not ready to buy in. Why? Because they have misunderstood their position. They think that they have time to discern, they think they have options. It's like Simon the Pharisee, remember him? He invites Jesus to his house so he can kind of explore and test Jesus.

¹ Ray Ortlund, "What is it like to be a demon", <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ray-ortlund/what-is-it-like-to-be-a-demon/>

Their presumption is that they can afford to move on from Jesus. That they don't *really* need Jesus. They are prepared to accept him if necessary, but they don't feel that necessity yet. And that is one of Satan's greatest tricks—to downplay the necessity of Jesus.

This is what Jesus means by his comparisons in **verses 29-32**, saying that the queen of Sheba and the people of Nineveh will “rise up” and condemn the Israelites for their lack of belief. Both Sheba and Nineveh were known for their paganism and excessive debauchery. But when both were confronted with the revelation of God, Nineveh repented and Sheba paid homage.

As they should have—Jonah went three nights in the belly of the fish and resurrected out—and Solomon was the most impressive, wisest king in the world. But Jesus is the prophet king who preaches far better than Jonah, who is far wiser than Solomon, and who went three days in the belly of death before rising again. Already Jesus has proven everything he can prove: the problem is not in God's revelation but the stubbornness of our hearts.

According to Aquinas², there are two kinds of presumption. The first is an overreliance on self—presuming that we know better than God. This is what we do when we attribute the power of God to Satan or consider the power of Jesus as just one power among many. It's not taking Jesus seriously enough by placing him too low, downplaying his power.

But the other presumption is a presumption of God's mercy. It's the attitude that says: “I deserve God's forgiveness. He is merciful and kind, so I have no need to repent”. Aquinas calls it “seeking pardon without repentance”. It's not taking Jesus seriously enough by placing yourself too high. It's the attitude of the cultural Christian majority. But it's just as dangerous as the first presumption. This is how Paul speaks of the danger of this presumption in Romans 2:

Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

What is the sign of Jonah? It's “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. How did Jonah become a sign for the people of Nineveh? One, he called them to repentance. But also, he showed them what God was willing to do in order to call them to repentance. God was willing to swallow Jonah whole and spit him out at them. God showed kindness to the people of Nineveh by sending them Jonah, because it provided for them the possibility of repentance.

And one greater than Jonah is here. He was spat out of the grave after three days, the grave he went into not because of his sin (like Jonah), but because of ours. And Jesus comes preaching to

² *Summa*, Book 2, Question 21. <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3021.htm>

us the message of repentance, that all we must do is turn to him to be saved—but we must consider ourselves to be Ninevites. We must consider ourselves to be gentiles, to be needy, to be outside of the kingdom. We must not make the mistake of thinking that repentance is for someone else, because daily repentance is the only remedy to presumption. Repentance is the sharp ax that chops up the root of pride that is deep in our hearts.

I want to end with a call to repent and consider again the seriousness of the message of Jesus. Let us consider these two questions together:

How might you need to repent of downplaying the power of Jesus?

How might you need to repent of downplaying your need for Jesus?

If you are struggling here—you feel down, depressed, scared, weak, intimidated, oppressed, let me not offer you self-help or self-motivation. Let me offer you the opportunity to come to Jesus, the one stronger than death, the one who has bound up the power of Satan and plundered his house, the one who calls us to recognize our sin, no longer hide our need, and turn to him. I want to provide an opportunity, if you need it, for prayer and repentance. Let's turn our false presumption of Jesus into truths about Jesus.