

When evidence is rejected

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're back in our series in Luke's Gospel, and our aim this morning is to see why it is reasonable to believe in Jesus Christ and why it's unreasonable to reject him. It is sadly the default position of many in our culture that to become a Christian is fundamentally irrational. It's ignoring reason. It's acting without careful consideration.

And yet what we're going to see today so clearly is that the facts are with Jesus, and the facts are with those who follow him. So let me lead us in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we think of Mary three weeks ago as she sat at Jesus' feet listening to him, the one thing needed. And we pray for ourselves this morning. Please would you help us to sit humbly at his feet. Please grant us certainty about who Jesus is, the implications of his coming, and the way in which we respond to him. And we ask it in his name. Amen.

Well, we started this section of Luke's Gospel on a Christian discipleship, on what it looks like to follow Jesus, back in chapter 10, verse 38. We've seen so far that the heartbeat of discipleship is listening to Jesus in his word, the Bible, and praying to God as our heavenly Father, and doing so with great boldness and confidence. Even now, as we live 2,000 years later without the physical presence of Jesus, nonetheless, because we have the Holy Spirit, we enjoy that same relationship with God that these first disciples enjoyed. If you've missed those two talks, please do listen to them online. They're great verses, I think, just for helping us to keep our spiritual sense of balance amidst the coronavirus outbreak, and amidst this completely different way of life, many of us have found ourselves in. And yet this section of Luke also has two significant passages on rejection, and why it is that people don't believe in Jesus. The first of which runs from chapter 11, verses 14 to 54. Today, we're looking at just verses 14 to 28, and the focus of these verses is the miracle that is there in verse 14, the casting out of a demon. Surprisingly, I think,

Luke tells us everything we need to know about the miracle itself in just that one verse, verse 14, because what he really wants us to see is the significance of the miracle. Because like all of Jesus' miracles, this is not simply a raw demonstration of power, but instead a compelling visual aid. Our global culture is, after all, highly visual. At school, teachers can hardly think of teaching without using audio visuals to reinforce an idea. In the workplace, people speak of death by PowerPoint. We can hardly watch television or use our electronic devices without being in some ways amazed by their visual variety and the creativity of our electronic words. Visuals are powerful.

[3 : 3 9] They reach places that words cannot reach, sometimes allowing us to see reality with a new clarity, perhaps to see things even that previously we had only grasped.

Well, my first point then this morning is verses 14 to 16, the fact of the miracle. Have a look at verse 14.

Now, Jesus was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the man spoke, and the people marveled. Now, it's worth remembering what we said in chapter 10, when Jesus' disciples reported back to Jesus that they had seen demons subject to them. That is, that you and I live in a society where the language of the devil and the forces of evil rarely feature, and yet globally and historically, that kind of world view is highly unusual indeed. In most other parts of the world, people are in no doubt whatsoever that evil is real. In other words, what we see here is not the world of make-believe. Indeed, if Jesus Christ really is God in the flesh, then perhaps we shouldn't be surprised if his coming to earth witnessed a heightening in satanic opposition.

Well, how do people respond to what they saw in verse 14? Well, notice they marveled at what they saw, but notice too that marveling is not the same as accepting. And the responses in verse 15, I think, are particularly striking. But some of them said he cast out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. In other words, rather than drawing the obvious conclusion, that here is Jesus Christ, the one who is God in the flesh, demonstrating the power of God, the power of God, the authority of God over evil. What instead do they do? Why, they attribute his authority elsewhere. They attribute it to Satan. While others, verse 16, ask for a sign, despite the fact that they've just seen one before their very eyes. While others to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven. What's so very striking, I think, is the pure irrationality of their unbelief, their obtuseness, if you like, their refusal to believe the evidence.

Bertrand Russell was a mid-20th century atheist, celebrity atheist, the Richard Dawkins of his day. He was once asked what he'd say if, in the end, he did find himself standing before God on the day of judgment.

[6 : 33] And God asked him the simple question, why didn't you believe in me? And Russell said he would reply, not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.

Well, I wonder how often people have said that to you. Someone said that to me recently. So I said, look, actually, there's plenty of evidence. And he said, where?

So I said, in the Bible. He said, that's not evidence. That was written a long time ago. We all know it's been changed and distorted by a whole process of Chinese whispers over the years. So I said, I disagree.

There's good evidence for trusting the Gospels, the eyewitness documents, and the fact that actually things haven't been changed over time. They are an accurate record of what really happened.

And yet, as we went on in the conversation, it became clear that he wasn't really interested in the evidence at all. And actually, whatever I said was not going to cause him to rethink his position.

[7 : 36] If only there was more evidence. It may be that you are saying that yourself, perhaps as someone who doesn't yet believe in Jesus, but would like to.

Or you may be saying, actually, as someone who does believe in Jesus, and yet you are puzzled by friends, family, colleagues, perhaps, who don't. And it's easy to start wondering, is there something wrong with the Gospel?

Is God being unreasonable? Asking people to believe in him on the basis of insufficient evidence? Well, maybe that you sometimes wonder, actually for yourself, whether you have made the right call in following Jesus.

Well, the answer from Jesus is no. There's nothing wrong with the evidence. What's wrong is our unwillingness to go where the evidence leads.

And so Jesus goes on to deal with each of these two objections in turn today. In verses 17 to 28, it's the objection of those who regard Jesus' power as demonic.

[8 : 43] While next week, in verses 29 to 36, it's the objection of those who want more signs. But notice, the one thing Jesus' opponents cannot do is to deny the miracle happened.

That, of course, is what many people want to do today. But presumably, if they had been there as these eyewitnesses were, even the most sceptical of 21st century sceptics would have marvelled.

And yet, of course, the fact is that people have always looked for alternative explanations of Jesus' authority. Some try to damn him with faint praise, saying he's a great teacher.

Others say he's a great religious leader. That no matter how illogical or inconsistent these attitudes may be, people so often prefer to ignore the evidence rather than to allow themselves to feel the weight of the implication of Jesus' miracles and the truth of Jesus' words.

It shows, of course, the unreasonableness of unbelief in Jesus, ignoring the obvious explanation.

[9 : 56] And in turn, it shows the reasonableness of belief in him, following the facts, going where the evidence leads. Clearly, whether someone believes in Jesus or otherwise is not a matter of intelligence.

It is rather a matter of the will. We saw that, didn't we? A few weeks ago, when we had Dr. Andrew Satch and Professor Richard Buggs at the golf club, Andrew interviewing Richard, both highly intelligent, both followers of Jesus Christ, both believing and trusting the eyewitness documents of the New Testament in the Gospels, both applying the same level of analysis and inquiry to the Bible as they do to their science.

It is not a matter of intelligence. It is a matter of the will. Firstly, the fact of the miracle.

Secondly, the significance of the miracle. Because verses 17 and 18 nail those who want to say that Jesus' authority is from Satan.

Verse 17, Now, Beelzebul is simply another name for Satan, and it is a simple picture.

[11 : 33] The Lord Jesus might equally have said that a company boardroom divided against itself will fall, or a government divided against itself will fall, or a sports team, or whatever it is.

If Jesus drives out demons by the power of Satan, that is a strategy of foolishness by Satan, because it means he is destroying and undoing his own work.

Indeed, verse 19 shows us just how ridiculous that is. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges.

Jesus is probably referring to Jewish exorcists of the day, who were generally regarded as exercising the power of God in some way. The point being that if Jesus is doing good only by the power of evil, then what about them?

It is a ridiculous argument. And yet there is more to say, because Jesus' miracles are never simply raw demonstrations of power to be marvelled at.

[12 : 39] They act as signposts. They point to something else. Just as in a couple of months' time, when the restrictions on movement are over, you might decide to go out into Kent for the day and enjoy a day out, or you might decide to go to Chessington World of Adventures, likewise, depending on, I guess, your age and stage of life.

So you get in the car. It's a lovely day. You're excited to be getting out. And after a while, after you've been driving for a while, you pass a signpost to your destination.

At which point, it would be foolish, wouldn't it, to stop at the signpost and say, hooray, we've arrived. Let's enjoy the day. Because, of course, the whole point about a signpost is not that you stop there and think and do no more, but actually you go where the signpost is pointing.

So then what does this sign, this miracle, point to? Verse 20. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has indeed come upon you.

It is one of the key New Testament verses for explaining why Jesus performed miracles. They are a visual aid, a graphic display, not simply demanding the response, wow, that's amazing, but to demonstrate that God's rule has indeed come in the person of Jesus Christ.

[14 : 09] God's work of reclaiming humanity from the grip of Satan has begun. Yes, there will be a final day at the end of history when the Lord Jesus will return, when evil will finally be destroyed, a whole new creation.

But in the meantime, Jesus Christ, God's King, has broken into history. Now, it's almost impossible, I think, to overstate the significance of what Jesus is saying here.

Back in Genesis, the start of the Bible, you will remember how Satan tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God and listen to him instead. It's what we all by nature do.

And yet at the same time comes the promise that one day Satan himself will be defeated. Now, how that happens is explained through the unfolding promises of the Old Testament.

And now in the coming of Jesus Christ, the moment of fulfilment is here. Remember here in Luke chapter 11, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will die on the cross to take on himself God's judgment, the punishment for our sin.

[15 : 24] Satan will be cast down and then finally defeated when he returns at the end of history. Now, I guess to some of us, this all sounds fairly fanciful.

Perhaps we should understand it in the same way in that you and I might understand an enemy invasion. This coming May, we'll see the 75th anniversary of VE Day, Victory in Europe Day, at the end of the Second World War in Europe, marking the surrender of Nazi Germany.

And yet it had been almost a year earlier that Allied forces had landed in Normandy in June 1944. At which point, if you'd been living in Normandy, in northern France, it had been completely possible to say, the Allies have come.

They are here. And yet, of course, it would be another almost a full year before the war was over. Well, in a far greater way, as Jesus Christ drives out the forces of evil, here is a very visual display of the fact that God's kingdom has arrived and Satan's cause is ultimately lost.

Although, of course, the war, so to speak, won't come to an end until Jesus returns at the end of history. Indeed, that phrase, the finger of God, is a deliberate echo of the words of Pharaoh's magicians in the book of Exodus, near the beginning of the Bible, as it records the events of over a thousand years earlier when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt.

[17 : 06] Exodus chapter 8, where we find that little phrase, marks one of the great turning points in the series of plagues that came upon Egypt. This is the point at which Pharaoh's magicians gave up their power no match for Moses.

And they declared to Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 8, verse 19, this is the finger of God. What were they doing? Well, they were following their reason.

They followed the evidence, just as Jesus calls on the sceptics of his day and his generation and every subsequent generation to recognise the same reality.

Hence the illustration of verses 21 to 22. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe.

But when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he's trusted and divides his spoil. Jesus Christ is the strong man, overpowering Satan.

[18 : 13] Jesus is describing here a picture of what we might call regime change when there's a new prime minister or when there's a new CEO at work or a new captain of a team. Everyone else has to readjust their positions to decide which side am I on, the old or the new.

Which leads us thirdly, verses 23 to 28, responding to the miracle. One of the features of our society is that it's popular to be neutral.

It's a culture where tolerance is valued, non-partisanship is attractive. In religious discussions, we're keen to avoid treading on people's toes.

We want to avoid offence. We prize diversity. And yet, neutrality and polite disagreement are not always a good thing. Take COVID-19, for example.

To my knowledge, no one is saying, well, let's tolerate different views about how seriously we should take this virus. If you're the kind of person who is anxious and fearful, then take action and put social distancing into practice and kind of lockdown and that kind of thing.

[19 : 29] But if you're the more tolerant and laid-back kind of person, then that's equally fine and just feel free to do nothing. The point is that some issues are important enough to force choices.

Verse 23. Whoever is not with me is against me and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Now, after everything we've seen from Jesus, that is not surprising.

There's no neutral territory when it comes to Jesus. Neutrality to him is opposition to him. Or to put that positively, if you're to decide for God, if you want to decide you're on God's side, then you have to decide you're for Jesus and you're on his side.

After all, if Jesus is driving out evil, if he's advancing the cause of good and you're not with Jesus, then I take it it's clear, isn't it, whose side you are on.

Can we see how verse 23 really calls out the person who says, you know, I like to think of myself as a good person, I believe in God, but I'm not really on board with this whole following Jesus stuff.

[20 : 49] It just feels like one step too far. Verses 24 to 26 make a similar point. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest.

And finding none, it says, I'll return to my house from which I came. And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then 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. And let's not get Jesus wrong. He's not saying that it's possible for his followers to be demon possessed.

That is a misunderstanding of these verses. Rather, he's saying that the kind of spiritual neutrality, which in a sense looks so appealing and rational and, dare I say it, quintessentially British, is in fact emptiness.

And it is a void which is simply waiting to be filled by something else. Many such people will say they have faith or a faith. And yet, can we see that if we are followers of Jesus, then love demands that we urge them to put their trust in Jesus and follow him.

[22 : 11] see what Jesus is saying? It's spiritually dangerous to be content simply with being a nice person. It's spiritually dangerous just to be rid of our problems.

I mean, there are plenty of people, aren't there, who come to church and are attracted to church because they're in difficulty or because life is hard. They're in debt or their marriage is a mess, they have mental health issues, they lose their job, they're fearful.

Indeed, that may well be you if you have joined us for the first time this morning. Some of us will know people who came to church. Perhaps they did something like the Christianity Explore course.

They were interested, they were stirred, and yet actually there was no real repentance and turning to Jesus. They never took the decisive step of following him.

Jesus is warning us against superficial spiritual experience. Verse 26, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. Well, in verse 27, Luke shows us another inadequate response.

[23 : 19] As he said these things, the 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. Many people admired Jesus or made vaguely positive noises about him.

Notice a true response goes much further. Verse 28, a true response hears the word of God and keeps it. Do you see the amazing promise of that verse?

Jesus' mother Mary, why she had the most amazing, wonderful privilege. She gave birth to Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. She nursed him. She brought him up.

She was truly blessed. And yet, if we have put our trust in Jesus, we are more blessed even than she. It's interesting, isn't it, that Luke doesn't demean Mary.

She had great privileges. And yet, of course, the privilege of every Christian believer are greater. and yet, nor does he venerate Mary, as some do.

[24 : 21] She too needs to receive Jesus and become one of his disciples. Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and keep it.

Now, it seems to me that if we belong to Jesus Christ, now more than ever is the time to stop and take that in. Many of us, over the last week or two, will be very conscious of things we have lost.

Freedom, friendship, physical friendship, certainty, income, convenience, and for some, health.

And yet, if we put our trust in Jesus Christ, we know wonderful, wonderful blessings. From this section, alone, since Luke chapter 10, verse 38, the blessing of knowing God as our Heavenly Father.

The blessing of listening to Jesus' words in the Bible. The blessing of the Holy Spirit living within us and making Jesus real to us day by day.

[25 : 31] Maybe, of course, that you're listening in and you don't know those blessings. Maybe that you are someone and as we've been looking at Jesus teaching this morning, you recognise that you're someone who has never positively decided for Jesus.

You are precisely in the category of person that the Lord Jesus warns us about. So what I'm going to do is to finish this morning by saying a prayer and inviting you to join in that prayer if you would like positively to begin to follow Jesus, to leave neutrality and to follow him for the first time.

Let me just read it first of all and then see if this is the kind of prayer you would like to pray. Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.

I understand now who Jesus is and why he died. I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus' death on a cross for me I ask you to forgive me.

From now on please give me the desire to obey you and to help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost. Well, if that is a prayer that you would like to make your own then I'm going to read it out again and do echo it in your own heart.

[26 : 55] Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died.

I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus' death on a cross for me I ask you to forgive me. From now on please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

Amen. Let me just say that if you have prayed that prayer for the first time then do please be assured that that is a prayer that God will answer.

It would be great for you to tell someone do please get in touch with me or anyone else on the staff team of Grace Church or indeed any other Christian whether at Grace Church or elsewhere I'm sure they'd love to help you to make the very best possible start in the Christian life.

Thank you. Thank you.