

Safe in the Lord

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[0 : 00] Well, I don't know what it is, but it's our human nature to pick a side, isn't it? In all sorts of areas in our lives. So the most obvious example is in sports.

If you live in Melbourne long enough, you eventually get asked, which side do you barrack for?

Now, you know, don't even have to mention the type of sport.

We all know that it's the AFL. Now, for better or worse, I go for the Cats. Yeah, yeah, yes. Not much. I had a bigger response in the morning.

Anyway, don't ask me why. I have no real connection with Geelong. Perhaps it's because my wife loves navy blue as a colour.

Or maybe it's because a colleague of mine in my first job brought me to my first AFL game, and he was a Cats supporter. But still, I get emotional when the Cats win.

[0 : 59] I cheer them whenever I see them on TV. It's not just sport, is it? But if you pick any other thing, like a reality show, Survivor, MasterChef, The Voice, whatever, we can't help but have favourites.

It's the same with politics and any other form of contest. And sometimes we are so invested that when they lose, it almost feels like someone in the family has died.

Well, tonight we're going to look at another contest. But this time, we'll see how important it really is to pick the right side. That actually, it's a life or death choice.

So let's begin in verse 14 of Luke chapter 11, where soon after Jesus had taught his disciples how to pray, they meet a mute man.

Now, not all disabilities are caused by demons, but Jesus, being the Son of God, knew that this one was. And so we read in verse 14, Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute.

[2 : 05] When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. But some of them said, By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he's driving out demons.

Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Nowadays, in our Western context, signs of evil and the demonic are not so overt.

But back in Jesus' day, and in some Western cultures today, evil is palpable. Everyone then who saw Jesus do this, believed that there was really a demon, and that there was no question that a demon had been expelled.

But what was unclear to them, was how Jesus did it. Did he do it by God's power? Or was it some trick by Satan, pretending to be good, so as to be able to deceive people into following him?

Now, if you go with Occam's law, that is, go with the rule that what is the most obvious is the right answer, then they should have gone for the straightforward answer.

[3 : 15] There's no need to entertain conspiracy theories, and yet some conclude that he was working for Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Beelzebub is just another name for Satan.

Others sat on the fence. Healthy skepticism, they might say. They wanted a further sign from heaven. Now, before we get into Jesus' response, the first point to make is that this episode shows that there is really good and evil.

Both these things are not human constructs, but they are realities in our world. There is such a thing as objective goodness, and conversely, objective evil.

Good is defined by who God is, and evil the exact opposite, where Satan and his minions inhabit. Nowadays, of course, we could walk around thinking that was not so.

So, I'm sure you've heard it before, in your workplace or at school, but people think nowadays that the world is basically a good place.

[4 : 21] Everything in the world is basically good. And evil only resides in the darkest corners of our society, you know, with the underworld or in the prison.

But as we've seen with Christchurch just over the weekend, that's clearly not true, is it? Likewise, the many royal commissions that we've had, we seem to be having perpetual royal commissions nowadays, aren't we?

But sexual and child abuse, financial corruption, there seems to be a lot of evil. And the truth is, yes, evil is actually all around us.

Where there's human sin, there's evil. We may not think of these things as demonic as such, but Satan is still behind it.

So, for example, marital strife, parental conflict, workplace backstabbing, not literally, but figuratively, these are Satan's ways to cause havoc in people's lives, to enslave them to sin.

[5 : 29] And of course, we are often complicit in it because of our sinful natures. So let's be under no illusion. The devil is alive and active and trying to wreak havoc.

Which is why when Jesus drives out the mute demon, there should really not have been any denial that this is God's work. And yet, the people do. They even cast him as being evil.

But Jesus now, in verse 17, points out how their logic is seriously flawed. So, he says, the Bible says, Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and a house divided against itself will fall.

If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now, if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out, so then they will be your judges.

But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. So, Jesus here makes two points to show them how wrong they are. First, as everyone knows in war, what you do is shoot your enemy.

[6 : 45] Right? You don't shoot the people on your own side. It's like watching a footy match.

There's a Richmond fool for it. Let's say he's charging down the middle, ball in hand ready to kick a goal, and then suddenly he's tackled.

But guess what? The tackler is another Richmond player. Can you believe that? Have you seen it before? No.

And if you're a Richmond fan, you'll be jering and booing, wouldn't you? Well, the same thing is happening here. Would Satan allow a demon to drive out another demon? Of course not. His whole aim is to keep people under bondage.

So, why would he release this man from muteness? Besides, this doesn't gel with the rest of Jesus' life. Right? Everything else Jesus does is good. And so, this is consistent with who he is and who he claims to be, a man from God.

So, what he does here is consistent with everything else he's done in life. But no, secondly, it's the people who are inconsistent instead because they haven't made the same accusations, have they, of those other people that have driven out demons by, you know, the followers of rabbis.

[8 : 05] If they accuse Jesus of doing it by Beelzebub, why aren't they doing the same with these other followers? It's not consistent, is it? So, it should be obvious that Jesus is undeniably good and yet some refuse to accept it and fail to see their hypocrisy.

Now, the question to ask then is, why are people like that? Well, because we don't like what Jesus' goodness means for us, what it demands of us.

As Jesus says, if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Which means the king has come, which means we have to submit to the king.

That means repenting and not wallowing in our sins, but loving what's good just as Jesus does. And we don't like that, do we? It's hard.

Well, Jesus next moves on to show how he's not only undeniably good, but that he has power over evil as well. So he continues in verse 21, when a strong man fully armed guards his own house, his possessions are safe.

[9 : 18] But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder. Well, clearly the strong man here is Satan, and until the coming of God's kingdom, he was under the illusion that his house was safe.

He was able to do as he pleased in this world, enslaving people at will, just like this mute man. But Jesus has now come, and Satan's lie is exposed.

Jesus is stronger than he is, and attacks and overpowers him. You see, this miracle, and others like it in the gospel, isn't being done by Jesus just for the benefit of the person being healed.

Rather, miracles are done as a demonstration of Jesus' power, that he has power over evil, and that Satan will be and has been defeated.

And that, my friends, is the reality now. That's the great news. Yes, there is still evil in the world, and it's real, but the kingdom of God has come, and so good has triumphed over evil.

[10:36] Jesus has taken away Satan's armor, and plundered the realm of evil, rescuing us from it. Now, how has Jesus done it? Well, you know the answer, by dying on the cross for us.

You see, what he did for individuals like this mute man is like a sniper shooting at an enemy one at a time. But what he does on the cross, and I've got a picture of it on the slide, is like the dropping of an atomic bomb in World War II.

You see the difference? His death on the cross has this global and universal effect that by that one act, he brings all the enemies to their knees and secures an everlasting freedom from evil for all of us.

And the amazing thing about the cross is that as you look at it, on the surface, it looks like evil has defeated good. You know, God's chosen king dying in shame, unable to defend his honor.

I mean, how can that be a victory over evil? And yet, that is the very moment when God achieves his decisive victory. When God uses the very weapons of Satan and evil and turns it back on them, you know, the lies, the jealousy, the hate, he uses all of that and achieves his end through those means.

[12:08] So that's why Paul can say in Colossians chapter 2 verse 13 to 15, which I've got in the slide, when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.

He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us. He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross, and having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphant over them by the cross. You see, Satan and his minions and the Jews were laughing at Jesus as he hung on the cross, but really all they were doing at that time was laughing at themselves.

Jesus, even as he was dying on the cross, was making a public spectacle of them. The cross, just like this healing here, is evidence that good has conquered evil.

But having witnessed the public spectacle, Jesus now says we all have a choice. Will we join him or will we reject him? Which side will you choose?

[13:24] There is no middle ground, no sitting on the fence. For Jesus says in verse 21, whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Now I think if we are honest, fence sitting is something we are all prone to. It is painful, but I don't know why we still do it. Of course, if you ask anyone, nobody wants all the bad stuff that goes with evil, right?

I mean, chaos, conflict, violence, who wants any of that? That's why, for example, if we had a choice, we want to live in safe and peaceful neighborhoods.

Do you want a convicted pedophile on your street? Or an organized crime boss living next to you? No. evil and the sin relates not to the outside, but to us, to our own lives.

So, for instance, do you harbor an unforgiving spirit? And yet, we are resistant to do anything about it. We prefer to hold a grudge against others.

[14:47] Or is jealousy and envy eating away at us? And yet, we keep comparing ourselves to other people, even though we know we should trust God for our needs, even though we should believe that he's not going to give us his second best.

And yet, we keep asking, why are we not like them? Or do we have a proud and critical spirit, always trying to put others down and thinking the worst of them?

You see, it's very quick for us to pounce on the evil or sin of others, isn't it? But not so when it comes to look at our own lives and seeing our own.

Instead, we love to hold on to our private sins, rather like the way Gollum in Lord of the Rings does with his ring, his precious, right?

Which, what happens? Eventually, destroys him. And that's what sin will do to us if we keep on holding on to it. You see, when Jesus calls us to be with him and to be for him, what it means is a total rejection of evil and a total embrace of good.

[16:01] We can't pick and choose which evil we want to keep, and we can't pick and choose which good we will embrace. If we try and have it both ways, then we'll end up not having Jesus.

And then what happens is what is now described in verse 24 to 26. Jesus says, when an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, I will return to the house I left. When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes out and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there.

And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. You see, I know many of us believe in Jesus because once upon a time, we saw our own inability to conquer sin.

Perhaps we tried and failed. Outwardly, we may have been able to fool others. But now, deep down, we knew we weren't up to it. And that's when we turn to Jesus, we turn to what he did on the cross, and we put our trust in him.

[17:08] And God, by his grace, forgives us our sins. We're like this mute man, cleansed from evil. So it's exactly how we had with 1 John 1:9, the verse that Victor put up, the assurance that if we confess our sins, God will forgive us.

So let me read again. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify or cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And so, if there's anyone here who has not done that before, explicitly acknowledged your sins, then this is the very first step.

You may not be mucked like this man, but the only way for the strong man to be defeated in your life, that is Satan, is to call on the one who is stronger, Jesus, whose blood cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

That's the first and vital step to overcoming evil. And if you haven't done that, then please think of doing that and come up to me at the end, come up to people up the front here after the service, they'll be more than happy to help you and pray with you.

But after that, what happens is that God begins the process of sanctifying us, that is, he continues the process of helping us to keep living clean lives. And we're given the Holy Spirit to do that.

[18:34] Which is why last week, in the passage that Jeff preached from, in Luke chapter 11 verse 13, Jesus assured his disciples that God is only too willing to give his spirit to those who ask.

Because without us submitting fully to the spirit, then Satan and his minions will return to wreak havoc in our lives. Jesus may have defeated them comprehensively on the cross, but they are not content to go quietly.

They want to take as many people as possible with them to deceive God's people even, if that were possible. And so for those of us who have initially welcomed Jesus into our lives at some stage, we must not shut out God's spirit from our lives.

Because when we do that, we create a moral and spiritual vacuum. And as the saying goes, nature abhors a vacuum. And so if we don't grow in Christ, we don't tackle sin and grow in godliness, then we are vulnerable to sin and evil returning.

And guess what? When that happens, we don't have the power, just as we did at the very start, to be able to defeat it. Many of you have seen David Attenborough documentaries.

[19:52] The animals in the African savannah, perhaps. So the picture here is of the herd of antelopes. They all want to stick together, don't they, in the plains.

And what's lying in the bush often? The lion. Waiting until one of the herds strays, perhaps a young or weak one, can't keep up.

And then what happens? The lion pounces. I was going to do a big roar, but I would wake those who are asleep. Well, that's the way the Bible describes Satan, a prowling lion scarring the earth to look for Christians to devour.

Perhaps those who wandered away from the faith, from church, perhaps those who are still holding on to their secret sins, those who are engaged in unhealthy relationships at church.

any weak link or weak spot, Satan will use in the hope of devouring God's people and God's church, both as individuals, but also corporately as the body of Christ.

[21:02] And just read how scary Jesus describes it, because it's not just the one unclean spirit returning, is it? No, he goes and brings seven more wicked spirits with him. And Jesus says the final condition of that person is worse than the first.

Now, sometimes this means a Christian returns to his past sins, like an alcoholic relapsing or something, but at other times it manifests itself in other ways. So, for example, I've read a story of a very prominent U.S.

pastor. Before he became a Christian, he was the sort of the swearing and cursing kind, foul mouth, but God in his grace saved him.

But because he didn't address the root problem of anger in his life, even after he became a Christian and, you know, what's more, he was allowed to become a leader of the church and a prominent leader as such, that ultimately manifested itself through bullying and abusive behavior in leadership.

He's since been found out and made to repent and all that. But if you ask me, this abusive behavior is actually worse than the cursing and the swearing in the first place, isn't it?

[22 : 14] in terms of the amount of damage he's done to people's lives? And so the question is, for those of us who are happy to call ourselves a Christian, we need to ask ourselves, how much are we submitting to God's spirit in our lives?

And the way to answer that question, to assess that, is to hear what Jesus says in the final two verses. So in verse 27, as Jesus was saying these things, a woman calls out from the crowd, blessed is the mother who gave birth and nursed you.

I think only a mother could say something like that. And if you ask me, it's a bit random, I'm not sure I would know what to say if someone shouted out in the crowd. But Jesus, not ever missing a beat, he uses it to drive home his teaching.

And so he replied, blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. And so we're back to the same lesson, aren't we, as the story of Mary and Martha, that of listening to the Lord, hearing God's word.

We know we are submitted to God's spirit when we listen to the word of God. But now Jesus makes it explicit as well that we're not only to hear, we are to obey as well.

[23 : 34] True blessing only comes when we hear and obey God's word. And as I said two weeks ago, that's precisely the spirit's job, to remind us of everything that Jesus taught and to empower us to obey it.

And so the second and ongoing way to overcome evil is to obey the word of God. Doing it is what sanctifies us and protects us from Satan.

Now, I've spoken very matter-factly about Satan today, and I know out there and perhaps even among us, there may be some people that don't believe that actually Satan exists.

You may be one of them here today. But if you are, then let me put this to you. If God exists and he's a spirit, his spirit, then so can angels who are spiritual beings.

And if angels exist, then so can Satan, who is after all simply a fallen angel. So if you believe God exists, then definitely Satan can exist.

[24 : 46] But the Bible's picture of Satan isn't the caricature that we see nowadays, you know, the pitchfork, red face, and horns. Rather, Satan is a ferocious spiritual enemy.

For ever since the time of Adam and Eve, has been behind every evil misdeed in this world. So he's not to be trifled with, and we're no match for him on our own.

But the really, really great news is God whom we serve is. Jesus is infinitely more powerful than Satan. That's why we read the Psalm today, Psalm 46, where God is described as a mighty fortress for God's people.

As a result of that, Jerusalem, God's city is safe and secure. But I want to put up verse 7 and 11, that's the first in the top and the bottom, repeated verses, where it says that the Lord Almighty is with us.

The God of Jacob is our fortress. And what this Psalm is saying is that God doesn't just make a place secure by his presence, so whatever your safe place is, it's not that when God is there, it's secure.

[25 : 58] Yes, that's true. Rather, this Psalm is saying that God himself is the safe place. He is the fortress we run to for our safety and security.

And that name there, the Lord Almighty, actually means Lord of hosts or Lord of the heavenly realms. In other words, God isn't this cuddly father that you snuggle up to for a bedtime story. He's the commander of the heavenly realms, of the heavenly armies who's waging war against sin and defeating evil and death. And his son, Jesus, when he's sent on to earth, comes as a commander in chief to fulfill that mission for him by dying on the cross.

And so, if you ever want to protect yourself from evil, and I'm hoping you do, because evil is scary, then the only safe and secure shelter is in Christ. And we find that shelter, as I say, my fifth point,

the two bullet points, by trusting and believing in his son, and secondly, by hearing and obeying his word.

And that doesn't mean that once we do that, we're safe from all harm. No, Christians will suffer still. But what will happen is that we'll be kept safe from Satan snatching us from God and taking away our eternal place in God's kingdom.

[27 : 26] So, friends, there you have it. What will you choose? Would you have goodness and Jesus or will you have evil and Satan? It's pretty obvious what the answer should be, right?

Nobody would say evil and Satan, I hope. But the thing is, if you choose goodness and Jesus, then it comes with the response as well. It comes with the response of hearing and obeying God's word and trusting in him.

Well, let's pray that God will help us to do that. Father, we thank you that you have sent your son Jesus to overcome and conquer evil. Thank you that we are cleansed from all unrighteousness through his blood.

If only we would repent. Help us to hear the word of God and obey so that we will be protected from evil and sin. We pray and ask this in his mighty name.

Amen.