

# The Kingdom Has Come

Anyone with enough bluster can silence an opponent and capture the



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attention of people. Turn on your television or go to the internet and you'll encounter outright lies, distorted claims, and untrue stories presented as reality. People choose what the "truth" is based on what they want to believe, as they always have.

Jesus continually faced opposition from those who insisted their version of God and his purpose was correct and any disagreement was wrong. So, what criteria shape your idea of truth in the spiritual realm?

Matthew 12 recounts several conflicts between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities. The Pharisees are angry because Jesus sees nothing wrong with his disciples plucking grain and eating it as they walk through the fields on the sabbath. They considered it "harvesting" on God's established day of rest, a blatant violation of the "law" (Matt. 12:1-8). Even worse, Jesus healed a man's withered hand while in the synagogue on the sabbath! Jesus' accusers set up this situation "in order that they might accuse him" (vv. 9-14). At that point the religious leaders felt justified in their plot to murder Jesus! As Matthew recounts a long list of Jesus' miracles in those dangerous days, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 42:1-4 for a description of God's beloved servant.

Matthew presents the most Jewish perspective in the gospels as he describes Jesus, the long-anticipated Messiah from God. He quotes more passages from the Hebrew Scriptures than the other three gospels and contrasts the clear differences between Jesus as merciful and loving with the legalism of the dominant Jerusalem leaders. We do well to see the dangers of dogmatism and legalism. The Pharisees' religious outlook was very close to Jesus' outlook: the importance of patterning daily living on the laws of God. But their great zeal to live out the laws of God became a meticulous burdensome task that lost sight of God's love and grace. The modern church faces the same danger when it demands rule

keeping, uniform doctrinal statements, and loyalty to the organization rather than to God. The Spirit of God never leads us into error, but neither does the Spirit oppress us with rules that subvert grace!

We are confronted in this text with the reality of evil – not in an abstract image of fate or human frailty, but the demonic. Modern society may enjoy fantasy stories about demons or the "dark world," while dismissing the subject as fantasy. Perhaps we have not paid close attention to the horrors of genocide and obviously evil personalities that appear in secular news stories. Some of us have witnessed demon possession and the powers of the occult.

We are introduced to a man whose ability to see or speak is destroyed by a demon. All afflictions and illnesses are not caused by demons, but in this account we are seeing the clear struggle between Satan and the Son of God. Jesus' freeing of the demoniac curse causes the crowd to ask the key question: "Can this (Jesus) be the Son of David?" (v. 23). There is no denial of the healing. The Pharisees must come up with an argument to discredit Jesus: "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons, that this fellow cast out the demons" (v. 24). Religious dogmatism and desperation can shape some curious ideas. Jesus counters with simple logic: infighting will always divide and destroy ... a divided kingdom is laid waste ... a divided house cannot remain standing (v. 25). This is not the first time the Pharisees have used this argument in their attempt to discredit Jesus. (See Matt. 9:34.)

Jesus turned the Pharisees' argument back on them: "If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out?" (v. 27). Don't play games with the occult, and don't make the mistake of turning the power of God's grace into a show to impress anybody. Jesus is communicating the love of God for all people, even those who have no social standing or who appear outside established religious guidelines. Satan is no respecter of persons. He destroys lives and society at will until someone, in the name of

Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, intervenes. Don't make the mistake of viewing this passage as a quaint story from pre-scientific times. Christ is God's answer to our deepest needs whatever our century of living.

Talking out loud about the reality of Satan and demons is a sure magnet for skepticism and ridicule, but when we hear reports of atrocities and violent crimes against Christians in our day the reality of evil becomes clearer. Matthew wants the world to know that Jesus is truly the "Son of David"; the Spirit of God is at work in Jesus, his words, his actions, and his willingness to die on a cross for us. In Christ, all that God promises from Genesis to Revelation becomes reality. When you invite Christ to enter your life and begin shaping your life by God's grace, that is when God's Spirit begins to work. As a Christian you are to share God's love, live by the example and words of Jesus, and trust the Spirit of God to make you an instrument of his grace.

In the darkness of our modern world – hatred, selfishness, indifference, and divisiveness – we must be the voice and example of God's love, the people of God who dare to be different. Christ has already won the victory. Isn't it time we live by that truth? Matthew introduces the need of every human heart and God's answer with the simple words: "Then they brought to him ..." (v. 22).

Dr. Gordon Clinard was my first preaching professor, an eloquent and powerful presenter of the good news of Jesus Christ. One truth he planted in my heart and head remains to this day: "Remember, you have in your voice and in your heart the single truth of God's love that every person needs. Preaching is not about you, but about the One who gave everything for you and those who hear you." Wherever you find yourself in life, that is where someone needs to know God loves them. Someone needs to be free of hopelessness and fear; someone needs to know they can choose a better way in God's grace; someone needs to know Jesus has been on the same journey and waits at the end to welcome us into God's open arms.

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