

“He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.” We heard these words of Christ read just a few minutes ago from the 11th Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. Considering them now, we are confronted with a choice. Are you with Jesus or against Him? Do you labor with Him to bring in the harvest or do you, by default, impede the work of His Kingdom? We’ll return to the question in a bit, but let’s delve into our lessons today to better set the scene and provide some context for this quotation and these questions.

The lesson begins with Jesus casting out a demon from a man who could not speak. Once the demon was exorcised, the man spoke clearly. Now, here in Luke, the focus of this reading is more upon the interactions between Jesus and those who witnessed this miracle. They who were able to speak, in this passage referring primarily to the Pharisees, would better have remained silent. This reminds of the old saw, “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open one’s mouth and remove all doubt.”

Reading on: “But some of them said, He casteth out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils. And others, tempting him, sought of him a sign from heaven.” The essence of this accusation against Christ is that He is in league with Satan, here called Beelzebub or “The Lord of Flies” as it is translated. Of course we know that this is completely backward for Jesus is God and works in perfect union with God the Father by the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were jealous of Jesus and therefore preferred to offend God by denying the power of Christ than to submit to Christ. They actively opposed the work of God.

Now could have Satan set up a false messiah in order to draw people from God? It is plausible, but it does not characterize in the least the overall effect of Christ’s ministry. The work of Christ resulted in a turning back of the rule of Satan and a drawing the Hebrew people into a more devout worship of God instead of a turning from God. If this was Satan’s

plan, it was not very well thought out.

Christ, in His rebuke of the Pharisees' accusation points this out. "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?" Internal divisions and distrust and strife is the death of most movements. Incidentally, it has also been the death of many a church. Satan would not control the fallen world if he tolerated dissent in the ranks or ceded such ground as a feint.

Christ continues, "But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace: but when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils." We see here that Jesus uses this interaction with these Hebrew religious leaders to portray to us the larger warfare in which He, and thus we, are involved. He states that the Kingdom of God has come because He is the King that has initiated it in this world. He is casting out devils. He is healing the deaf, the dumb, the blind, and the lame. He is turning back the curse brought to mankind by the disobedience of Adam. Satan is falling from the sky like lightning.

We have here a clash of kingdoms. Where Satan used to reign as the strongman binding all of humanity, Christ now comes, throwing off the shackles of sin. Satan was a strong man, but Christ is the strongest, and all of the treasures of Satan, souls who were lost and perishing, Christ now claims as the true king. This is the context for the quotation with which we began. We must choose sides. More than that, the decision to be on Christ's side cannot be passive. To attempt to be a Switzerland, to just maintain neutrality, is to decide against Christ.

Unfortunately, I believe most of the people in this country exist in an uncommitted middle.

Oh, we might be ok with Christ. We like Christmas and Easter. We go to church enough to feel good about ourselves, but let's not get crazy here. We wouldn't want others to think we were Jesus freaks or anything. We don't really want to be all that inconvenienced by religion. We don't really want to give too much money to the church. Let's shoot for the region of respectability. But our Lord Jesus says, "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth." There is no neutrality here. We are either actively engaged on the side of Christ or we are deceiving ourselves.

If we claim to be on Christ's side, then we must actively obey. We must get off our rears and actually do something. Love is not a feeling. It is a verb. If we do not heed this, we risk become Pharisaical in our lives. What do I mean by this? Well, the Pharisees, and perhaps we can say the Hebrew people in general being led by the Pharisees, had covenanted with God to be His people. Abraham, the original patriarch of the Hebrew people, was counted as righteous by God because of his faith demonstrated in his obedience. God married the Hebrew people, as it were – this is how the Old Testament portrays this covenantal relationship. He saved his bride out of bondage from Egypt and brought her into a land of blessing.

Yet time and time again, the people forgot their husband. They failed to teach the ways of God to their children. They failed to obey the covenant. They became comfortable. They started following after the gods of the surrounding people until finally God divorced them sending them away into exile. In God's mercy, He eventually brought them back into the promised land, and they were exceedingly careful not to go after all those foreign gods. In fact, just to make sure that they didn't forsake God again, they started interpreting the commands of God to make them more onerous and they segregated themselves for and by their righteousness. Purity was the goal even if it meant alienation from less worthy Jews. Turns out they rather liked the status of being of above average holiness, of being members of

the exclusive class. They liked it even more than they loved God. So again, the Hebrews had missed the mark.

So when Christ relates this strange narrative of a man who is freed from a devil only to be repossessed later by seven more and left in worse shape, we should take heed. This story is largely directed at these Pharisees and their followers. They were originally saved as the covenant people of God. The spirit of the world had been displaced by the Spirit of God – not as fully as we enjoy now, thanks be to Christ, but God saved them and made them into His holy family, His royal priesthood.

But as time progressed, they lost the plot. They were so focused upon their traditions that they forgot that the heart of the law is love, not duty. Deuteronomy 6 affirms the Unity of God. We therefore confess Christ to be One with the Father with the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is blasphemous to accuse Christ of being in league with Satan. Deuteronomy 6 then commands the Hebrews to love God with all of the heart, with all of their soul, and with all of their strength. Thus Hebrew obedience to The Torah, and Christian obedience to God as following the foundation of the Hebrews, is predicated upon love, not upon duty as if we were earning holiness points with God. By the time of Christ, the Pharisees, who as students of the scriptures should have recognized their Messiah, were instead actually opposing God. Their final state was worse off than they had originally begun before the Abrahamic covenant. They were not passive enemies of God, merely alienated from Him due to original sin. They were active allies of Beelzebub working against the Messiah! They accused God of being in league with the devil when they themselves were Satan's active partners. Lord have mercy!

Of course it is rather foolish to oppose Christ. By their thoughts and deceptive words, the Pharisees were condemned. In our epistle today, the Apostle Paul warns us also to beware of seemingly sophisticated arguments. "Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because

of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them." Christ is the light, and we are to be children of the light, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit in all goodness and righteousness and truth. Let our lives and words put to shame the enemies of Christ, revealing them to be children of darkness through the light of Christ.

The gospel this morning ends with a peculiar dialog. A woman in the crowd called out blessings upon Mary the mother and nurturer of Jesus. She is, no doubt blessed above all women and a shining example of faithful, loving, submission to God. In His response to her, Jesus affirms that Mary is indeed blessed, but then He continues, "Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it."

Two things we must note here. First, not all of the Hebrew people were led astray by the Pharisees. This woman was so inspired by Our Lord, that she burst into praise of God by acknowledging that such a wise man as Christ, indeed was a blessing to His family, and was a credit to His mother. Of course, the common people were the recipients of the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus. They had no power which was threatened by the Messiah.

Second, Christ emphasizes for all those present and for us Christ's followers in history, that to follow Christ means more than simply to nod in agreement with the preacher. It means that you and I respond to Christ's call to action. The battle between these kingdoms is raging and we are called to join in this battle, and we are challenged this day that sitting on the sidelines does not cut it. If you claim Christ as your Lord, then you must do something for the kingdom. Passive obedience is not obedience. "blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." "He that gathereth not with me scattereth."

Now, of course during Lent, we are called to self-examination. We are called to become

aware of our sinful patterns of behavior. This is good. We desire to become aware of areas where we fall short of the glory of God and then do something to address these sins. We are to be commended for our pursuit of holiness. Yet if that holiness does not create a burden in our hearts for the Kingdom of God, for the well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and also for bringing the lost to Christ, then we are little better than Pharisees.

“He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.” If we take scripture seriously, then these are chilling words. Lord, have mercy upon us! At the same time, thanks be to God that He does have mercy upon us. May we never take His mercy for granted. May the mission of the Kingdom not be just for that other guy, but let it be our mission. Answer the call of Jesus Christ, Our Captain and the Lord of Hosts. Awake thou that sleepest, arise, and Christ will give thee light.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.