

Under Whose Authority?
By Jason Huff
Psalm 62, 1 Corinthians 2:1-10a, 14, Luke 11:14-26

Our final Scripture reading today is from Luke 11:14-26. Listen now to the Word of God. “Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. 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 is driving out demons.” Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. 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 to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, 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 and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.””

Have you ever had a day where nothing turns out quite right? My Monday was kind of like that. We had planned to take Mark and Michelle, our guests here at church last week, to the Ford Rouge Factory Tour. We’d gotten our tickets from the local library and taken the 40-minute drive down to Dearborn. When we got there, we were told that there was a building problem. They weren’t going to be running tours. Now Catha and Mark were convinced that since the factory tour wasn’t running, we should be able to use those tickets for the Henry Ford Museum, which has the same tour price. No dice. They talked to a couple of different employees at a couple of different gates, but they all said the same thing...we don’t have the authority to let you take the museum tour. I can tell you, when I drove off, I was very happy to be driving a Chevy! Later in the day, we got an ad from a store that sells computer games. Mark and I went to find a couple of games for the Nintendo Wii that were on a good sale, a couple things I thought my family might enjoy. Got there with the ad in hand and guess what? The clerk didn’t know anything about it. And what was his line? “I don’t have the authority to change the price. If you want to do anything about it, you’ll have to come talk with my manager who won’t be in until tomorrow.” At that point in my day, all I can tell you is that the store employee should have been really glad that I’m a Christian.

Authority is huge. Authority is what gives us the ability to get things done. When we have authority, it means the buck stops here. We’ve been granted the capacity to make decisions that matter and the power to carry them out. Most of us have some authority, at least in a limited sense, about ourselves; at the very least, we’ve got the power to make choices about what we do and who we see and how we handle ourselves. Some of us have been given more authority and are recognized for it. And as long as our authority isn’t abused, it can be a powerful tool.

But authority also has its limits. For example, in a Presbyterian church, as the pastor I have the authority to choose what I preach about and what songs are sung and a few other things. But I don't have control over the church's checkbook or even the time of the service. In our church, the biggest authority is given to the session which works together to make decisions that affect the church, and their authority is granted to them by a vote of the congregation. And all of us are under authority. Whether we love it or hate it, our government sets laws that have authority over us. If we break the law, the government has the authority to arrest us. Even those of us who are free of bosses at work or school or whatnot still are under that authority.

And knowing the basis of authority really changes our attitudes and the way we act. A few years ago Catha and I were out at a movie and just as we were leaving, the car started acting up. I'd gone from travelling 30 miles an hour to putzing along at maybe 12. All of a sudden, this red light comes on behind me. Uh-oh! My stomach is now on the floorboards, I get all nervous, I pull over, roll down my window. The guy comes up and asks, "What seems to be the problem?" And I start explaining...and then I notice that this guy isn't a police officer. He's mall security. Now I appreciated him wanting to know what had happened, but my attitude in my head changed. This guy wasn't going to give me a ticket for something; he didn't have the authority. I liked that. I knew that he had authority from the mall to patrol the parking lot and that was fine, but it wasn't the same kind of authority that a policeman had. He was a really nice guy, he wanted to help, and so I'm not knocking him in any way. But it shows that we all know that where authority comes from makes a difference.

In today's Scripture, we see Jesus driving out a demon. By now in the gospel of Luke, it's common; there's virtually no description of the event, it's just how it happened. And unlike skeptics now who say that Jesus was just a man who didn't have any special power, nobody could deny what Jesus was doing. There was no doubt. So the question comes up – by whose authority does Jesus do all that He does? It's not a question of can he do it, it's the question of how he does it. And if He does it all by the power of God, then suddenly there is no doubt that they have to take Jesus seriously. If Jesus is working under the authority of God, then what He's taught about repentance and faith and obedience and the Kingdom of God is all true.

So there's two responses. One denies that Jesus is under the authority of God at all. This group is adamant against Jesus and says that what He's doing is demonic. They deny the power of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus. They see clearly the work of God and say it is of the devil. It's the deepest denial anyone could make of the Holy Spirit. There's another group that looks really meek by comparison. They're like, "Yeah, Jesus, that's great stuff you've been doing, but you know, we just can't be certain how you're doing it. Can you give us a sign from heaven just so we can be really *really* sure?" At first, it seems like this is at least respecting Jesus. But the truth is, these folks saw miracle after miracle and still weren't convinced. The first group denied the Spirit's work outright, which is beyond awful – but the second group didn't even have the courage to admit their lack of faith.

So Jesus shows the fallacy in their thinking. Only by the hand of God can something good come out of something evil. Any kind of true healing is an act of God. Yes, there are charlatans; yes, there are those who want the power of God for their own gain. But Jesus worked under God's own authority. As the Son of God, He has that right.

Now some of you here this morning might have a problem with the idea of demons, but Jesus' audience didn't. And the Jews had their own exorcists who called upon God to help those who had been possessed or oppressed by them. This wasn't an issue in their day. So Jesus says, if I'm not driving out these spirits by God's hand, when I clearly say that I am and have shown that I have His authority, how is it that the Jewish exorcists do it? Jewish exorcists went through a long ritual during an exorcism, but Jesus simply commanded the spirits out and they were compelled to obey! Jesus explains that Satan is like a strong man who has guarded his stolen property – the people that he has tried to tempt away from God. But Jesus is stronger; as the Son of God, He has overpowered the strong man and has reclaimed the people under sin's sway that rightfully belong to God. Jesus is acting in the authority and power of God Almighty, and indeed, when Jesus speaks, He speaks also for the Father and for the Holy Spirit. No miracle is going to prove it, because if one miracle can't prove it, a thousand miracles aren't going to do the trick either. There's always some way to get around it. But clearly, Jesus is acting on the Father's behalf, doing the Father's will; you either accept it or you don't.

And that's where Jesus makes His real point. Either you stand with God or you don't. Either you work for Him or you work against Him. There is no middle ground. The people around Jesus were once ignorant of Him, but they aren't any more, and neither are we. The ones who were asking for a sign were just wanting to stay uncommitted as long as possible because it was easier than accepting the truth. And Jesus says that's just not going to work. Jesus used the example of an evil spirit that leaves someone, that's forced out. That spirit comes back and finds that its former home is cleaned out but there's no other resident yet. So the spirit goes and gets all his buddies and then they throw a party. The person is worse off than before!

Now this story with demons flying around makes little sense to us today, but think about it this way. How many people do you know who once came to church, said they believed in God or in Jesus, were involved for a bit, but now they're not. Maybe they've gotten back into old sinful habits, maybe not, but they've grown cold about God. A lot of churches used to call this sort of person a "backslider." But as one famous evangelist by the name of Ray Comfort put it, the problem with a backslider is that they never really slid forward! It's the reason why so many people in the United States call themselves Christians, even though their lives tell a completely different story. And it's because a lot of people are like the person in the story who's got a clean and empty house. At some point in their lives, they heard about Christ, they thought they might "try him on for size," see how having God in their lives fit. They may have said a prayer, made some motions towards good behavior and whatnot. But they never were willing to have God become the center of their lives; they never truly gave up their own lives and allowed Christ to take over.

When we do that, when we allow the Holy Spirit to take up residence in our lives and truly change us, then our spiritual house is occupied. We're under the authority of the Holy Spirit. There's no room for anything else. But it doesn't mean anything for somebody to say a prayer and "try on Christ" if they don't get themselves out of the way and let God have His way. It's just housecleaning, and let's be blunt. We're all under authority. Either the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our lives and is transforming us from the inside out and is our authority, or we are under the authority of Satan. We control our own sinful choices, and we are responsible for those choices, but when we willfully sin and do not repent, we are in the enemy camp.

The apostle Paul was just as blunt when he described His conversion experience on the road to Damascus. In Acts 26, Paul tells how he was persecuting the church, and how as he was travelling to pursue more Christians, Jesus appeared to him in a blinding vision. And Jesus told him, "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." The word translated as power in the Greek is the word *exousia*, whose main definition is "authority." Jesus sent the disciples and sends each Christian out to turn people from the authority of Satan to the authority of God.

So what does this mean for us today in Macomb Township, Michigan? It means this...we need to get off the fence, and here's how we do it. Jesus taught that the greatest commandments were to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. The keys to being fully under God's authority are right there within the first commandment...heart, soul, mind, and strength. Once we have those down, we can love our neighbors as ourselves. So here's how to do it.

The first step is the heart check. This is vital; if you haven't taken the first step, none of the rest matters. The heart check is when we determine if we've ever decided to give our lives over to God and stop living for ourselves. The first step towards following God and being under His authority is repenting of our sin and believing that Christ is the only way we can be saved from the sins we have committed. A lot of people never take this step, even plenty of people in the church. Some folks think that going to church shows God that they are good enough to be considered for heaven, or at least better than a lot of other people out there. But if you've never had a moment where you realized that you were a sinner and made a conscious decision to turn away from sin and to turn towards God and believe in Christ for salvation – which is the definition of faith – then you are still an enemy of God. Hebrews 11:6 tells us "without faith it is impossible to please God." Faith isn't just believing in God's existence; James 2:19 says the demons believe in God's existence and tremble. Faith is trusting that Jesus came to pay the penalty for your sins so that rather than facing God's judgment, you will be under His mercy. This is the step that makes room in our spiritual house. Without it, nothing else matters. If you're embarrassed because you've been in the church a long time and never really gotten to this point, be brave and fearless, get over it, and do it.

And soon after that, we've got to take the next step...the soul check. In the soul check, we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives to remake us, to take out the garbage that's still within us and to change us so that we desire what God desires. The Holy Spirit is a gift that Christ promised every true believer, and when the Spirit comes to us, it takes up residence inside of us. Sometimes you'll hear somebody say, "I have Jesus in my heart." Well, the truth is, the Holy Spirit is the one who is sent to us, and we know Jesus and have a relationship with Him through the Spirit's work in our lives. This is the step many people don't take, because wanting the Spirit to clean us up is different from simply wanting to avoid God's judgment. It means we're going to become different people; we're going to give up the sins that used to please us and live for God instead. And the sad thing is, many people would rather drop God and face eternity apart from Him in hell than to become like Him and drop the sins that they crave. It's hard for all of us. But the soul check leads us directly under God's authority, and we must take it.

Third step...the mental check. This is one that we all have to take, but it comes at different times. The Holy Spirit's work in making us holy people, set apart for God, is called sanctification. Philippians 2:15 says that we "may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation." God wants us to be just like Him! And that's where the mental check comes in. When we ask the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, often there's a lot of work to do. The Holy Spirit not only cleans out all our sins but also starts to convict us of the areas of our lives that haven't been surrendered totally to God. God wants us to give over everything to Him – our marriages, our thought lives, our finances – everything belongs to Him and is His to do with as He would direct. There's no part of our lives God doesn't want us to give to Him. The mental check is one we have to do regularly where we say, "Is there anything I haven't given over to God?" We might start asking others to help us, to show us places we may have missed. This is a hard step because it often shows us, even as God is working to remake us, just how selfish we are. But as we do it, we not only are under God's authority, but we start to be able to exercise God's authority. As we rest in God through prayer and study and as we do the things that God directs, we will find we have the power to do those things because we have God's authority to do them. In Matthew 17:20, Jesus taught His disciples, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." The mountains in our lives will start to move as we do the mental check to turn everything over to God.

The final step is the strength check. Strength is how we persevere, how we overcome after a long time even when the going gets rough. When we love God with all our strength, it means that we stay continually devoted to Him even as we grow in love and joy and the other fruits of the Holy Spirit. The truth is, staying devoted to God is tougher than we might think, because it's not our natural way of doing things. Our nature is to drift back to our own selfish ways. As Bible scholar D.A. Carson puts it, "People do not drift towards holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. [Instead,] we drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated." That can't be our way of doing things. We cannot get close to God and realize His benefits and think, "Well, I've been there and done that." Being a person of faith takes discipline over the long haul. And the strength check is where we honestly look at ourselves and see if we've started to slide. If not, wonderful; if so, then we repent and work to get off the spiritual fence and reclaim our identity as children of God.

God wants us to be fully devoted to Him. He has given us the means and the tools to turn to Him. Don't wait for more signs. Don't fall into the trap of seeing miracles all around you and calling them coincidences. Be brave and bold and take the four steps – be totally, painfully honest with yourself and God, and move forward in your relationship with Him today. Because you *are* under authority...take the steps today so that you know you are under God's. Let's pray.