

*Freedom*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 103:1-12, Galatians 5:13-18, Luke 4:31-44*

We continue this morning with our third Scripture reading from Luke 4:31-44. Last week, we heard about Jesus' reception in his hometown of Nazareth, where a warm reception quickly turned cold. This week, we read about his time in Capernaum that followed. Here's what Luke writes. "Then [Jesus] went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, "Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-- the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. All the people were amazed and said to each other, "What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out!" And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area. Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them. When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ. At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea."

In the Western world, we are really confused about what we think about the supernatural. Much of modern science has tried to rule out the existence of anything beyond the physical world. Statistically, belief in supernatural beings on the whole has gone down in the last twenty years. We have difficulty believing in what we can't see, hear, or touch. But at the same time, many of us realize that there is something real beyond this world, our youth in particular, and they often experiment with it. A Barna poll in 2006 showed that nearly a third of teens had participated in fortune telling; 80% read horoscopes and more than a quarter believe them to be almost always true. And again, nearly a third reported having some sort of experience with an angel, a demon, or some sort of supernatural being. 89% believe in angels; 61% believe heaven is real; 58% believe that Satan is a real, spiritual being who is the enemy of God. But what was most striking in the survey is that the vast majority of teens are really confused about it all. There is a real hunger for understanding this creation that God made, but there is also a lot of uncertainty because we just don't know what to make of the spiritual realm. Having worked for a short time in a hospice unit, I can say that even many doctors who don't believe in much of anything admit that their patients' health is often deeply affected by their spiritual beliefs and practices, for good and for bad.

Today's passage from Luke gets us into the thick of the spiritual realm as Jesus ministers in Capernaum after returning from Nazareth. The text is ambiguous about how many Sabbaths He actually taught in Capernaum, but what's clear about his teaching is that it has authority. In that day and age, the local rabbis would typically teach by discussing the Old Testament passage that had been read in the service, and they did it like lawyers. They would cite a precedent set by this rabbi over in Bethlehem and this other rabbi over in Jerusalem and they would try to come to a conclusion here or there. It was very wishy-washy. They taught like they knew the law rather than knowing the God who created the law. But with Jesus, it was totally different. He came in power and spoke with authority. This is important, because Jesus first established his authority through his words.

One particular Sabbath, Jesus proves that authority through an exorcism in the synagogue. We don't know who this man was who had the unclean spirit. Maybe he wandered in. Maybe he was a regular attendee who had some issue in his life that let this spirit take control. But the truth is, the Bible isn't that concerned about spelling out the situation because the point of the story is that Jesus had authority throughout the whole event. It's also clear that this is not a case of someone suffering from a disease. There are situations in the Bible where a spirit creates a condition similar to that of epilepsy or schizophrenia. But this is not a situation where we can say that they just didn't understand the nature of mental illness back in those days. The things that the man says can't be attributed to any other source than this unclean spirit.

Now this spirit is agitated. It wants Jesus to leave it alone. It names Jesus and calls Him "the holy one of God" in an attempt to surprise Him and to gain the upper hand. But Jesus won't have any of it. Jesus commands the being to be quiet and to come out of the man. Some people have wondered over time why Jesus made the spirit be quiet, since it was telling the truth. I believe that it's for two reasons. First, it is not yet time for Jesus to be proclaimed as Lord and Savior to all people. Jesus proved Himself to be the Son of God through both His words and His actions in His three years of ministry. This announcement is true, but it's timed to cause Jesus trouble. The second reason Jesus silences this demon is because its testimony can't be trusted. If we know somebody at work always lies about what they've done, when they do tell the truth about something, we're not liable to believe them. An unclean spirit is a master of lies, so his words – though completely true in this case – are untrustworthy and actually mean to do harm.

How Jesus handles this situation shows his utter authority. He doesn't need to say any magic words or incantation; he just makes an order and it has to be obeyed. The demon doesn't like what has happened; it throws the man down before he leaves, which was its only possible act of defiance. Even then, the man isn't harmed. And when the crowds see this, they are even more astonished than before. Jesus isn't merely a man of words but a man of action who can really cleanse someone. They have simply never seen anyone like Him.

Then the location changes and Jesus goes to Simon's house. This is the first time Luke mentions Simon, who will later be known as Peter. Peter's mother-in-law is very ill. She has a high fever, and we know that in this era, it could have been deadly. Without Tylenol or Advil or any of the modern medicine we have, she's in serious trouble. Jesus does something pretty amazing. He rebukes the fever and it leaves.

This leaves us with questions. Why would Jesus speak to a fever? This situation really *is* from a disease, not something caused by an evil spirit. But Jesus speaks to the fever to establish that He has authority over sickness just as He does over everything in the spiritual world. He has the power of God at His command. There is nothing that can disobey Him. But second, Jesus rebukes the fever because it isn't supposed to be there. Sickness, pain, death, suffering...none of these things were in God's plan for humanity. When our ancestors gave in to temptation and allowed sin into the world, this was the result. God never wanted these things to happen to us. They are the natural outgrowth of sin, which affects the whole world around us. We're told in Romans 8:19-21, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed...for the creation was subjected to frustration...the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." While creation has not yet been fully healed and that affects us in ways like sickness, God has complete and total dominion over creation. When He tells sickness to go, it goes. When Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and others in His ministry, it shows His true desire for us is to be free from sickness and free from death. And we'll talk about it more in a minute, but when Simon's mother-in-law is healed, her response is to care for her guest's needs.

Luke tells us that Jesus continued healing well into the late evening on the Sabbath. He does for many what he did for the man in the synagogue and Simon's mother-in-law. He lays His hands on them and they are cured. In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands wasn't a sign of healing; it signaled divine blessing. Jesus is not a magician; He is a bestower of blessings on people, blessings which are His as God's Son to give, blessings which heal. And at the same time, others who are oppressed by demons are set free from their torment. While the demons attempt to create a mess by telling everybody his true identity, Jesus stops them. Jesus knows the path he must take and he will not take any shortcuts. Finally, after all is said and done, he goes to a solitary place...perhaps to rest and pray. The people go to Him and try to get Him to stay. They are excited about this young man who has done so much for them. But he says to them the same thing he said to those at Nazareth...I must continue preaching the good news to all people; I am not here just for you. And in Capernaum, unlike Nazareth, that message is accepted. They have found freedom in Christ, and so they let Him go to serve others.

Now there are plenty of things in this passage that are going to remain unanswered. But there is plenty more that we can learn and practice in our daily lives, things that can give us peace and joy and rest in God if we really want them. I see three takeaway points for us today. First, *there are real spiritual powers in our world, but all of them are under the authority of Jesus*. Second, *Jesus came to give us real freedom from all that burdens and oppresses us*. Third, *we are freed to serve*. Let's take a look at each of these.

*First, we need to be aware of spiritual powers in our world, all of which are under Jesus' authority*. They do exist. Some, called angels, are on the side of God. Some, who are fallen angels called demons, are not. The Bible never teaches much about them. Its primary concern is for us as believers to be aware of them and to avoid ungodly practices that might expose us to the enemy. As the noted Christian author C.S. Lewis put it, "There are two equal and opposite errors...one is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."

Right now, some of us might feel like this kind of warning about the supernatural is unnecessary. As Christians, we may have steered far clear from anything that seemed remotely evil. We may know nothing about it all. But in difficult times like these, people often turn to supernatural practices to get a handle on our future...especially those who have grown up with confused views on spirituality and the spiritual realm. This area has a strongly Christian influence, but without even trying I've passed a couple of fortune tellers and psychic shops in local neighborhoods. Playing with a Ouija board may seem like an innocent game, but the point behind it – receiving hidden knowledge through a spirit – is the same. New Age beliefs promise to help people to have a spiritual edge. They come in many names and forms, but it's all about trying to find spiritual power outside of God and His goodness. And I am here to warn you that it is against God's design and can lead to spiritual oppression. It's not something to play with.

At the same time, another side of wrong spirituality is superstition. No form of Christianity endorses superstition; in fact, Roman Catholicism and many other Christian denominations state that superstitious practices are sinful because they ultimately show a lack of trust and faith in God. However, a lot of Christians still act this way. Whether it takes the form of passing on chain letters or staying at home on Friday the 13th or knocking on wood, superstition is alive and well. But again, the central problem with them is that through believing in them, we give authority to something that has none. Only God has authority over our lives and our fate.

That's the key issue. Do spiritual beings have power? Yes, they do. Just like you and I have the power to do certain things, so do they. But all power and authority in the universe pales in comparison to the power and authority of our God. There is no need to worry about the spiritual realm because God controls it completely. God wants us to live lives devoted to Him, and He promises to be all the strength we need. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says to the apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." It is OK that we are weak. It is OK that we have problems. It is OK that things aren't perfect for us. Because God's power becomes all the more evident when He works through us, as imperfect as we are. We don't need to turn anywhere else to find power over our circumstances because God is the only one who truly has it. He promises that He will see us through.

This leads us right into the second point: *Jesus came to give us real freedom from all that burdens and oppresses us.* This part is probably the most important part of what I'm going to say today. Jesus can free us from every single thing that causes us heartache and pain and grief. No matter the root causes for those painful things in our lives, Jesus gave His life so that we could be totally free both in this life and in the next. Jesus wants to release you from every addiction and everything that oppresses you. Now there are some addictions that we all tend to know about: we often talk about addictions to drugs and alcohol. If those are the things that trip you up, Jesus can set you free from them. But there are also addictions many of us don't talk about. There's the addiction of Internet pornography, which is a problem for more than half of American Christian men. There're addictions to eating. There are addictions to money and spending and shopping. And there are addictions that don't even fit the typical...some of us are addicted to control...if we don't feel in control, we get angry and difficult to be around. Some of us are addicted to the desire to be important. There are many, many things that have some sort of authority over us.

Now does this mean that there is some sort of supernatural power controlling these things? Not necessarily. Our temptations come from both inside of us, from our sinful nature, and from outside forces as well, from the world and its opposition to God. But if there's anything that you don't want to do, that you know God doesn't want in your life, but you feel powerless to stop doing it on a regular basis, that's oppression. That's addiction. And no matter what the root cause of any addictions or oppressions you may suffer, Christ has the power to set you free. Just last week, we heard how Jesus proclaimed about himself, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, [and] to release the oppressed."

Some of us have been Christians for a long time and have struggled with various sins and addictions. We know that God promises us freedom but we simply can't seem to find it. Most often, our first reaction to our addictions is denial, followed by guilt. We get stuck in a vicious cycle we can't escape. But there is hope. Praying and reading God's Word and turning to Him on a daily basis are all part of finding freedom from those cycles. This is also where the church comes in. God works through the church to break those cycles. There are ways to help you get into accountability groups. We can refer anybody to help that's available in the community. We can get your computer set up with an Internet filter; we can get you into some sort of money management class; we can get you Christian counseling. All you have to do is talk to me or to one of the elders in confidence. And Jesus set up his church so that we, together, could support one another and overcome these burdens. Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." God did not leave us without a support network. He promises us true freedom, not freedom for a day or a month, but freedom for a lifetime and beyond, and the work of the Holy Spirit and the church together make it possible.

Moving on, this passage also shows us that Christ wants to heal us like he healed Simon's mother-in-law. He wants to heal us not just physically but totally, from all the scars we have on the outside and on the inside. Now this raises the question: why isn't everybody physically healed? Why do we not see amazing healing miracles like we did in the New Testament? It's a very good question. Like I said earlier, sickness and death was never part of God's plan for us; most diseases are not punishments from God but just a byproduct of sin being in our world.

But God uses illness in a variety of ways for His glory. There are some times when God does provide amazing cures even today. Other times, God uses illness and physical problems to bring us closer to Him and to spread His name. We have a friend back in Kentucky named Gigi who's around 80 years old. She was diagnosed just a few days ago with cancer, and she has only two or three months left to live. The doctor was expecting for her to take the news badly, since this was the first diagnosis she'd ever received about her troubles and there is no viable treatment. But she simply smiled at him and said, "May whatever happens to me be the Lord's will. I've been waiting my whole life for God's good gift." She knows she will suffer more; she is suffering right now. And yet she doesn't want to be defined by the disease that will eventually take her life. She wants to be known only for the Savior that she has followed for so many years. And that testimony will reach beyond her life, even now as I tell you about her.

So will God cure the ailment that has bothered you for many years? Perhaps He will. He might not. But either way, God wants to work through that suffering to give you real freedom. In John 16:33, Jesus tells His disciples right before His death, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” We can overcome too, whether God does heal our bodies or just heals our hearts.

And this leads us to our final point this morning: *we are freed to serve*. A lot of people get nervous about this passage because as soon as Simon’s mother-in-law is made well, she gets up to serve Jesus and those with Him. They take it as a sign of dominance and control – Jesus healing a woman so she can fix Him dinner, so she can fill her feminine role. But it’s simply not true. Simon’s mother-in-law is a perfect example to **all** of us, no matter if we’re men or women. Because the freedom that Jesus gives us is the freedom to serve God faithfully.

In Mark 9:35, Jesus calls His disciples to Himself and says, “If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself [the] last of all and [the] servant of all.” Jesus had all power and authority over the whole of creation, and yet Philippians 2:6-7 says, “Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Jesus came serving others. Just in today’s story, he stays up late into the evening healing and curing those who were brought to him. Jesus is the epitome of a servant; He gave up all His rightful power, even becoming obedient to the point of dying on a cross so that we might have eternal life. The freedom He gives us is to do likewise. Many of us want freedom from our problems and the real sin issues that oppress us, but we have never thought about what the freedom would be for...what purpose it would serve. When we are free from those things that bind us, they also free up our time and our funds and all the different parts of our lives. If we have Christ’s freedom but do not respond in the right way, we’re liable to fall right back into oppression and sin all over again. As Paul says in Galatians 5:1, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” The reason we may not find freedom from sin and from our addictions is because we are not ready to use our freedom to serve.

So...if you really want to be set free, remember that God does it so that you can proclaim the freedom you have found through Him and so you can serve others in that freedom. Maybe that will be through helping others or helping the church...giving away the money you used to spend on yourself and your own desires...spending that extra time in the Word and growing in relationship with God and listening to what He desires for you. Serving God has tons of benefits, but the main one is being in relationship with Him and knowing that no matter what happens in this world, you are His child. There’s no power in the universe that can take that away.

Jesus came to set us free...the sick, the infirm, those who are oppressed by spiritual powers, those who are addicted...there is no chain He can’t loosen and no burden He can’t lift. I encourage all of us today to hand over those burdens, those sins, those things that bind us, to our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. If we do, we will find ourselves truly free...free to start again with Him, free to build a new life with Him, and free to serve Him and to serve others. Let’s pray.