

November 20, 2016

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Matthew 12:22-29

There is a battle going on. It is between the power of good and the power of evil. It is being waged in every heart and every mind, in every home and every family, in every church, in every denomination, in every nation, and throughout the world. The battle between good and evil is not always easy to see, but it's happening!

It's happening on the field of your individual thoughts, in your mind. Sometimes, we struggle to think from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, while the perspective of the world keeps invading, distracting us from the faith, and leading us astray into worldliness. We need to hear often Paul's admonition, "*Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" (Romans 12:2-3)

In our hearts, the seat of the will, we want to seek the will of God, while our own self-interests seem to reign too easily, and so the battle is raging. We need to hear Paul telling us: "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but, in humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to the interests of others!*" (Philippians 2:3-4)

In our homes, we want to nurture what is good for us, and for our families. But so often in our own homes, where we hope to find comfort and escape from the daily grind of our lives, we struggle to find the time we need to invest in what is best, and our battle is against the invasion of complacency. In our families, where the battle of wills often begins, and the phrase "I want" produces chinks in the walls that shelter us from evil, parents often struggle to parent well. But they begin to co-opt their authority and wisdom by lavishing upon their children enormous freedoms at the expense of discipline and believe they are being loving, while good spiritual guidance becomes rare or hard to find.

In our churches, where faith and love, kindness and mercy, hope and righteousness are so important, good works often takes center stage in our mission and our ministry and, all too often the battle of wills is escalated by *preferences* at the expense of *purpose*, and, the dominance of a few at the acquiescence of many. Meanwhile, denominations are divided over political or social issues at the expense of the richness of their heritage and, the guidance of their traditions is substituted with agendas that are personal among their leaders.

In the nation, good values and ethical morality struggle to overcome the outspoken, often perverse or distorted minorities that appeal so loudly for liberal tolerance and unbalanced justice. And in the world, where tyranny and oppression are either given too much focus in some areas or are ignored in others, the struggles for power and position too often seem to neglect the needs of the people, or, they deny the good purpose of government at the expense of fairness, equality, and justice for the least in creation.

There is a battle going on. There seems to be no place for neutrality, or, spectatorship. Neutrality becomes the enemy of good as it does nothing good by doing nothing at all. You can't be a spectator in the battle of good against evil. Jesus said, "*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*" (Matthew 12:30) Was this a foreshadowing of the moment of His arrest when all His disciples abandoned Him? Scattered? Does it contradict what He said elsewhere when His disciples tried to stop a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' Name because he did not follow with them, where Jesus said, "*Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you!*" (Luke 9:49-50) No!

Remember that the enemy of The Enemy is our friend. In the battle against evil, where evil is being defeated by good, welcome the good!

Jesus, even the Name of Jesus, is stronger than Satan. Satan is the one who thinks he is the strong man guarding his castle in Jesus' parable in this passage. Satan thinks his reign is secure. But Jesus overpowers him as is witnessed by His miracle with the mute blind man. A glorious miracle! And though demonic possession is not always the reason behind every inability to speak or see, it was with this case. When Jesus cast out the demon, and the man was able to speak, *"all the crowds were amazed!"*

But in that crowd there were some who were able to speak perfectly well but who had nothing good to say. Some Pharisees (I guess all of them didn't, leave back in verse 14, when *"the Pharisees went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy Him."*), still watching Jesus' every move, couldn't see the blessings in the healings of the man with the withered hand in the synagogue (12:10-13), of the crowds outside afterwards (12:15-16), and now, of this mute blind man that had been brought to Jesus. These are good things, not evil. These few critics, for whatever reason, try to undermine Jesus' popularity with the crowd with the slanderous accusation that Jesus casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. (12:24) But Beelzebul is evil. The name Beelzebul is the name of the pagan Canaanite storm and fertility god. Some translations say *Beelzebub* which literally means *lord of the flies*. And though a lot could be unpacked by discussing this name and the pagan Canaanite religion, suffice it for now to say that the name Beelzebul was applied to Satan interchangeably by the time of Christ. And Satan is evil, the Adversary. Meanwhile, first of all, what Jesus did was good.

Secondly, Jesus asks a very pointed question: *"If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judge. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come to you."* (12:27-28) The offensive accusation actually backfires on these slanderers. They don't seem to know the difference between the power of God and the power of Satan. Their own exorcists will be their judges because they could just as easily feel slandered.

Thirdly, why would Satan work against himself? Jesus makes this point by saying that *"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand."* (v.25) (Perhaps our governmental leaders need to remember this truth. Lincoln gave the people of the United States this reminder!) When we work at cross purposes with ourselves, the results can be our collapse.

Before seriously examining this further, think of why Satan *might* actually seem to work against himself. Evil can be very subtle. It draws you in the way the serpent did Eve. By pretending to know something, or, by suggesting something just isn't so, or, even by just looking good on the surface, or, at first....evil draws us in. And then the trap is sprung. We get caught, and Satan gets a grip on us. *"We are tempted by our own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death!"* (James 1:14-15) Sometimes, Satan lures us by our own desires.

But a divided household, or a divided kingdom will fall when those within it are working against themselves. Marriages fall apart when husbands and wives are working against each other, or, when together they work against God! And we might be working against God simply by our neglect! Families fall apart because of this, sometimes, or, when children work against their parents. Granted, different individuals will claim personal goals and purposes different from one another, but there should be an overriding goal and purpose for every married couple and for every family – faith in God and the building up of the Church.

But churches suffer division when people lose sight of their part in the battle against evil. And nothing beats Satan back in defeat more than the worship of Jesus Christ. *“Whoever does not gather with Me, scatters!”* If people get scattered by what we are doing in Church, Satan gains a victory. But if the people gather...! There is a victory more glorious than we might imagine. And though too many people seem to neglect the relevance of the gathering together of believers, we are here! We are not divided. We’ve got Satan outflanked. And instead of dwelling resentfully on whether or not there has been a thinning of the ranks, we need to hear the battle cry and fight the good fight, not the preference fight, or the denomination fight, or the style fight. Let’s fight evil! We need to call every Christian soldier from their barracks of comfortable complacency and neglect, raise up a standard of faith, unite in our

Satan laughs when a congregation of some 300 members can only gather 100. But we know... we know that wherever two or more are gathered in His Name, Jesus is there! (Matthew 18:20) But we must be gathered! In His Name! Not scattered. We must show up! For then we are strong. Together we can defeat Satan. Alone we can defend ourselves, and that’s not bad... But together, there is so much good we can do that evil seems almost non-existent in our midst. When we bind Satan, we not only plunder his house, but his kingdom is ravaged, it is *laid waste!* Let’s remember always that together we are *with Christ!* And Jesus said, *“Whoever is not with Me is against Me!”*

If you compared your life right now to a fortress, is it like a solid rock; is it slowly eroding; or, is it quickly crumbling? Are you on the attack against evil, or, feeling besieged? Is there anyone you know who needs to be reminded that they are a part of our battalion? Get them to gather!

That’s an order!