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Matthew 12:22



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Steve Gregg addresses the concept of demon possession as a real phenomenon throughout Scripture but cautions against assuming that all physical disabilities are caused by demons. He points out that the majority of cases of disabilities in Scripture are not apparently caused by demons and that it is incorrect to assign demons as the cause of all physical illnesses. Gregg also notes that when someone is obviously possessed by evil spirits, it is not necessary to deny the existence of the supernatural. There may be encouragement to believe that spiritual means, such as taking authority over the powers of darkness in the name of Jesus, can remedy chronic conditions caused by demons.

Transcript

Our studies in the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew bring us today to a passage beginning at Matthew chapter 12 and verse 22, which I will read from now. In Matthew 12, 22, the apostle writes, Then one was brought to Jesus, who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. And he healed him, so that the blind and mute man both saw and spoke.

And all the multitudes were amazed and said, Could this be the Son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons. But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself.

How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or else, how can one enter a strongman's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strongman? And then he will plunder his house.

He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad. Now, I'm going to stop reading there, and we'll only really be able to comment

this time on a few of these verses, and we'll take the rest at a later time. Let's just begin discussing the early part of this passage I just read.

Then one was brought to Jesus, who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. And he healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. Now, there are several issues here to discuss.

The idea of demon possession, of course, is taken for granted throughout the Scriptures as a real phenomenon. And this is not the first time we've encountered it in the Gospels, and it is not the last time we'll encounter it in the Gospels or in the book of Acts. And I dare say it's not the last time we'll encounter it in modern times either.

I believe that demon possession is a phenomenon that is still with us in our own time and needs something that Christians need to recognize and know what to do about. Demons are personalities. They are spirit beings.

We are not told anywhere in Scripture where they came from, although we are told that some of the angels who at one time served God defected, and those are now in rebellion against God. Now, the Bible does not actually tell us that the demons are the same beings as these angels, though that is usually assumed to be true. In Christian theology, most Christians believe that the fallen angels are the same beings as the demons that we encounter here in these stories.

This is possible. We simply don't know on the basis of Scripture whether that identification is to be made. If the demons are not to be identified with the fallen angels, then it's not entirely clear what their exact origins are.

But one thing the Bible makes very clear is that they are malevolent, they are evil, they are hostile toward God and toward people. They like to torment people. That's the main activity of demons as we read it in the Scriptures.

It's interesting that we might have thought that a person under the full control of a demon would be recognized by his immorality or his otherwise sinful behavior. And I'm not saying that demon-possessed people will not be sinful, but I'm saying that in the Scriptures, the main activities of demons when they possess people appear to be tormenting them rather than dictating behaviors that are immoral or sinful. Now, again, I'm not denying the one in order to emphasize the other.

A demon-possessed person may be very sinful or very immoral, but the essence of demon possession in the Scripture seems to be that a demon inhabits a person in order to bring various forms of torment to that person. And in some cases, the torment is mental and spiritual so that the person is insane and mentally and emotionally tormented. In other cases, it is physical.

In this particular case, this man was demon-possessed and he was blind and mute, which

means, of course, he was unable to see and unable to speak. Now, what I find important about this to observe is that this man's behavior is not said to have been affected. This man was not living in the tombs, cutting himself with rocks.

This man was not standing up in the synagogue screaming and acting bizarre and disturbing things. He was not schizophrenic. He didn't have any of the behavioral things that we find in some of the cases of demon possession in the Bible.

The man was simply physically handicapped. He was disabled. He was physically blind and he was also physically mute.

Now, I say physically mute, but I don't really know that there was any organic cause of his muteness. It may have been something that was imposed upon him psychosomatically, but the point is that his condition was a physical condition, or so it would appear. He was physically disabled in more than one way, and yet the cause of his physical condition was spiritual rather than organic.

He was not, in other words, blind because of damage to his cornea or to his optic nerve. He was blind because of some interference in the sight process that was caused by a demon in this case. Likewise, his inability to speak was an imposition of demonic oppression or possession upon him.

When he was delivered of this demon possession, he could see and he could speak. Now, from this we need to cautiously deduce a few things. One, we have to be able to acknowledge from this that some cases of physical disability may be not from organic causes, but may in fact be demonic.

Now, even, of course, the medical professionals will often say that certain forms of disability and sickness are not organic in origin. A very large percentage of sicknesses are often said to be psychosomatic, meaning that it's a mind over matter issue. It's the way the person is thinking, or it's something in the mind that makes him unable to function physically.

I can't claim any expertise on any of that, and I can't comment positively or negatively on that. Perhaps it is true that much physical symptoms are the result of merely a mental condition. However, if this is true, then it should not be difficult to understand by extension of the same principle that a physical condition can sometimes be the result of a spiritual thing, rather than, let's say, a physical injury, or a virus, or a genetic problem, or whatever.

It can be a spiritual thing, and it can be caused by a demon. This we see illustrated not only here, but in a few other cases in the Gospels where the persons who are demon possessed and are delivered through the ministry of Christ, prior to their deliverance, they exhibit physical symptoms. And as far as we know, they don't exhibit any other

evidence of demon possession.

It seems like the physical symptoms are the extent of their problem, and there's nothing more mentioned. And when the demons are cast out, the physical condition is gone. Now, this much we have to be prepared to acknowledge from the Scripture.

But there's another thing we have to be careful about, and I'm sure many of you already can anticipate what I'm going to say. And that is this, that it is mistaken, and it would be biblically incorrect, to say that all cases of sickness or physical disability are caused by demons. This is not so.

Jesus healed other blind men, of whom it was never stated that they had demons. When he cast demons out of people, he would speak to the demons and tell them to go away. But when he healed people, generally speaking, who didn't have demons, he simply commanded them to be well.

And so there are a number of cases, for example, in the Scriptures where Jesus heals blind people and restores their sight. This is an unusual case, where the blind man was made blind by a demon. And therefore, rather than just speaking to him to restore his sight, he cast the demon out.

And that resulted in a restoration of sight. And what we must learn from considering all the biblical data is that there are cases of disability that are caused by demons. But these may be exceptional cases.

The majority of the cases of the same kind of disability in Scripture are not apparently caused by demons. The Bible acknowledges the existence of organic illness and organic causes. But it also acknowledges there are some cases where there is no organic cause, but it is a spiritual being that causes the problem.

Now, that, of course, should help to correct a wrong notion that some of the more liberal type theologians feel. You know, in our modern world, there's many modern thinkers who feel that to believe in demons is really archaic. You know, that's sort of medieval.

We live in a scientific age. We can explain a lot of things scientifically today that ancient people didn't understand. And sometimes it is said that because they didn't understand them, they just attributed them to imaginary, invisible beings like fairies and demons and things like that.

And so they would argue that when you read in the Bible about demons, you're really reading a representation of the mythology of the writer and of the people of the time. But that, they would argue, we live in a time now where there's no longer any need to believe in demons. It's a little naive.

It's kind of silly. Certainly, there's no need to believe in demons today because people

who were thought to be demon-possessed in biblical times, we can now assign a physiological or a matter of mental illness as a means of diagnosing their problem. And we live in a scientific age where we don't need to talk about demons anymore.

Well, to suggest that the biblical writer and the people of the biblical times believed in demons simply because they didn't understand the organic cause of sickness and that they therefore superstitiously assigned all things they couldn't understand to unseen forces like demons, quite misunderstands and misinterprets the material of the scripture. If this were the case, then we would expect all the sicknesses of the Bible to be attributed to demons, all mysterious illnesses. If we're reading of a people who simply out of their ignorance of scientific things, just assigned all unexplainable phenomena to the works of demons or gods, then we would not find as we do in scripture so many cases of sicknesses that are just treated as mere sicknesses that are healed in a way that even physicians could heal in those days sometimes.

And yet, the Bible differentiates between cases where a problem is caused by demons and a time where it is not. The scripture, in other words, cannot be simplistically written off as simply a superstitious document that thinks that demons existed and that explains all the mysterious things that happen to people that are bad. The Bible does not assign all sickness or all evil to demons.

Much evil in the Bible is assigned to human nature, not demons, and much sickness is addressed and discussed without any reference to demons at all and without any assumption that demons were present. So, when we do read of a case where a person's condition was caused by demons, we need to ask ourselves, why did the people in this case recognize a demonic cause and not recognize it or not assume it in many other situations? Now, my answer would be, the people of biblical times knew the difference between demon possession and some mere natural phenomenon and that is because demons act differently than viruses do, for example. Demons, for example, would speak out of people.

Demons would empower people to do things supernatural, like the man of the tombs who could break chains that were put upon him by his supernatural strength that the demons gave him. Sometimes, demons would confer upon the person they possessed powers of clairvoyance that seemed impressively accurate and when the demon was cast out, those powers were gone. We have a story like that in the book of Acts, chapter 16.

And so, it would seem that people would recognize in unusual cases, and maybe not all that unusual, but in specific cases as opposed to others, instances where there are alien personalities inhabiting people and creating a supernatural phenomenon and that the person's problem was not merely physiological, genetic, chemical imbalance in the brain or whatever. I mean, to suggest that demons are simply a superstitious way of

describing the forces, misunderstood forces of human personality or something like that is to miss the point entirely of why people used to believe in demons. And by the way, some of us still do.

I mean, when you see a situation where a person suddenly becomes another person and foreign voices are speaking out of him and those voices sometimes communicate information that that person had no opportunity to learn and yet turns out to be true information. Sometimes about things that are going on elsewhere that the person whose mouth is being spoken through could never know by natural means. Or you see a case where Jesus encounters such a person as this and commands the demons in him to leave him and to go into a herd of swine.

And the man suddenly is in his right mind and the herd of swine suddenly go crazy and berserk and run off a cliff into the water. Six thousand swine. Now, it seems to me that such occurrences are not easily explained in natural terms.

And the only reason to rule out the idea that this is a case of demon possession by a modern thinker would be because modern figures don't believe in the supernatural. And this is why people in biblical times could recognize demon possession where modern, intelligent, sophisticated, educated academics can't recognize it. It's only because modern academics are bigoted.

That's right. They have a bigotry against the supernatural. Ancient people didn't have this bigotry.

And I call it bigotry because that's all it is. To say that the supernatural does not exist is to say what no man really has the power to say with any certainty. A man may say, I have personally never seen a phenomenon that I could call supernatural.

A man could justly say that. But to say that there is no such thing as a supernatural realm. To say that there are no beings that I cannot see and there are no powers that I cannot explain is to be bigoted against something, a realm of possible reality that one simply hasn't experienced.

And it is the arrogance of saying because I haven't experienced it and because my experiences must be normative and I'll judge all other things by my experience. Therefore, no one can have experienced it. This requires an incredible amount of bigotry and arrogance on the part of modern academics.

And of course, they are not deficient in either of those two qualities, bigotry or arrogance. In the old times, people were a lot humbler. They were willing to believe what was obvious.

And when someone was obviously possessed by evil spirits, they didn't have the bigotry that required them to say, well, this can't be supernatural because there's no such thing

as the supernatural. No, they were open to the possibility of the supernatural and for that reason, they didn't have the difficulty recognizing it when they saw it, that modern academic sophisticates do. And I'm not the least bit ashamed of saying I believe in the supernatural.

I'm open to it. Now, I don't believe I'm naive. I don't believe that I attribute to the supernatural things that needn't be so attributed.

At the same time, I'm glad to be open-minded enough to believe that some things may be explained in supernatural terms best because that explanation really corresponds to the reality. Well, that's how the ancient people in biblical times were. They could recognize demon possession and they didn't have a philosophical ax to grind to a priori rule out the possibility.

And therefore, they were more in touch with reality than many modern academics are who have simply limited the aspects of reality that they're willing to acknowledge as existent. Well, in this case, of course, this blind man and mute man was demon possessed and this possession caused his condition. And I would like to suggest that some persons today who experience disabilities may indeed have the same problem.

Now, in my opinion, it would be very wrong to assume that every person who is disabled has demons. It simply isn't the case. There are cases in the Bible where demon possessed people experienced epileptic seizures.

But there's other places in the Bible where epilepsy is listed as a separate category from demon possession where it's recognized that there is such a thing as epilepsy which is not caused by demons. And likewise with blindness and muteness and some other conditions. In Luke 18, we read of a woman who was bent over and could not stand upright.

And it was because she had a spirit of infirmity. When Jesus cast the spirit out, she was able to stand upright. But it would be wrong to assume that everybody who's got curvature of the spine or who is hunchbacked, you know, has a demonic cause.

All I am saying is this, that Jesus was willing to deal with problems for what they were. He did not assume demons were always involved, but he knew when they were. And he's willing to deal with them as such.

I think that those of us who would like to alleviate the suffering of others need to be aware that there are times when people's sufferings are caused entirely by physiological and organic causes. And medical science may have something to say for them. And there are also alternative therapies besides medical science that may be of use, herbal for example or homeopathic.

But the point is that we recognize as Christians some people's conditions which we hope

to alleviate are physical in nature. They're caused by physical causes, quite easy to understand in some cases and in often ways that they can be physically remedied. But there are cases that are not like that and don't fit that description.

And I think it would be very wrong for us to assume that there are no cases today of demon possession. And when people are demon possessed, a variety of things may result from it. Among them can be physical disorders.

That's what the Bible teaches. That's what the Bible illustrates. And once we recognize that, we may be more in a position than we were before to help people who cannot be helped through normal medical means.

Now I don't mean to raise the hopes unjustly of people who may be listening to my voice who have had chronic conditions that doctors have not been able to heal. Some of these conditions may indeed be physiological. They may have no demonic origins at all.

It may just be that the doctors haven't yet discovered what it is. And it's mysterious but not necessarily supernatural. At the same time, there may be some encouragement for some who have had chronic conditions to think that maybe they can be remedied by a spiritual means.

By taking authority over the powers of darkness in the name of Jesus and casting them out. I cannot say that this will always be the case because I don't believe it will always be the case. I'm not even prepared to say it will be the case very often.

But because the Bible has instances of it, I am prepared to say there may be instances of it today. And to suggest to somebody that their problem may be caused by demons. Some people think, oh, you're going to terrify people that way.

Actually, maybe people will be terrified but I wouldn't find that to be a terrifying thing. I would think it a hopeful thing. A demon, after all, can be cast out.

Some physical conditions cannot be easily cured. And therefore, we need to take the whole counsel of Scripture into consideration when trying to understand both human need and what needs to be done to alleviate it. We'll continue our study next time.