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Matthew 12:29 - 12:30



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this explanation of Matthew 12:29-30, Steve Gregg discusses the power of the kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit. The spiritual reality of the kingdom cannot be observed in a physical sense, and Nicodemus was told that one must be born again and born of spirit to see it. Jesus operated with the power of the Holy Spirit, allowing him to resist the devil and confront the kingdom of darkness. As a result, the kingdom of darkness retreats when it is faced with the power of the kingdom of God.

Transcript

Our studies in the Gospel of Matthew today bring us to chapter 12 and verse 29. Jesus said, Or else how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man, 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 spend a little more time than one might think necessary examining this statement about breaking into a strong man's house.

Jesus said, Or else how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house? The reason I want to spend more time than some might think necessary on this is because in this little illustration, we might call it a parable, or it might be an analogy, but Jesus is telling us something very important about the impact of his kingdom coming into the world as it did 2,000 years ago. Now, the context of his statement, of course, is that in the earlier verses he had cast a demon out of a man, and there was a notable demonstration that the demon had come out because the man had been blind and mute, but when the demon came out, the man could then see and speak, and this impressed everybody. The multitude said, Oh, could this be the son of David? Could this be the Messiah? And the critics of Jesus did not like hearing the people talk that way, and they said, No, he's doing this not as an agent of God.

He's doing this as an agent of Satan. He's casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. And Jesus responded to them saying, Well, first of all, that doesn't make sense at all.

On the one hand, Satan could not be expected to oppose himself and bring his own kingdom to an end. Furthermore, the idea that Beelzebub is the only one who can cast out demons, as you're presupposing, would condemn even your own Jewish exorcists who cast out demons. Are they doing it by the power of Beelzebub, Jesus says? And then he said in verse 28, But if I'm casting out demons by the spirit of God, which is, of course, the postulate that he is advancing, that he is indeed doing this by the power of the spirit of God, he says, Then surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

And at that point, he says, Or else how can one enter a strongman's house and plunder his house unless he first binds the strongman and then he will plunder his house? The point he's making is this. The casting out of demons, which was so characteristic of the ministry of Jesus, was a demonstration that the kingdom of God had broken in, had overcome, had overtaken them, that it had inserted itself into human history, and it had done so powerfully, so powerfully, in fact, that it was possible to go through and uproot the strongholds of the kingdom of darkness by the power of this kingdom. Now, the power of the kingdom, as Jesus points out, is the power of the spirit of God.

And he said he was casting out demons by the power of the spirit of God. But he said that this activity of the spirit was a demonstration that the kingdom of God had come. And then he gives the illustration of plundering a man's house.

Let me just try to put this together because it is so important. The kingdom of God, which Jesus said had been so demonstrated to have overtaken them by his ministry of casting out demons through the spirit, that kingdom of God was the subject of much prophecy in the Old Testament. The kingdom of God originally was associated with Israel, and God had given Israel the opportunity at Mount Sinai to be his kingdom.

In Exodus 19, verses 5 and 6, God had said, if you will obey my voice indeed and keep my covenant, then you will be a peculiar treasure unto me and a kingdom of priests. He said this to the Israelites. The Israelites had the opportunity to be obedient to God and be his kingdom.

But they refused his kingdom. In the days of Samuel, the elders of Israel told Samuel they wanted an ordinary king. They didn't like it anymore, the present arrangement where God was their king.

And so they asked for an earthly king. And God told Samuel, they haven't rejected you, they've rejected me that I should not reign over them. And so the prophets later came and said that God would someday restore himself as their king.

And he would do so in the person of an agent that he would send who came to be called the Messiah. And this Messiah would come and he would re-establish the kingdom of God among his people. And God would again be king over his people.

And when he did, there would be a great deliverance, there would be a great salvation. And this would issue in an age of the kingdom where the Messiah would reign in righteousness and peace over all of his people. Now this, of course, became one of the most attractive images of the Old Testament.

And the prophets frequently spoke of this messianic peace and the kingdom that would come through the Messiah. There are many predictions about the coming of the kingdom of God and the Messiah. Now Jesus here, of course, is the Messiah.

And he speaks to his generation and says, if I'm casting out demons by the spirit of God, then hey, get a clue. The kingdom of God has arrived. The kingdom of God has overtaken you.

He was essentially saying that the fulfillment of those prophecies was now. That he had, he was, they were at that time seeing the fulfillment of the prophecies about the kingdom. It has come.

There was another occasion recorded in Luke chapter 17 in verse 20, where the Pharisees demanded of him when the kingdom of God would appear. And his answer was, the kingdom of God does not come with observation. In other words, it won't be observable.

It's invisible. It's spiritual. He said, neither shall they say, lo, here it is or lo, there it is.

But rather, he said, the kingdom of God is in your midst. That is to say, the kingdom of God had already broken in and was here, but it was spiritual and it had not been observed by them. But it was there in their midst.

There were people in the crowd who were citizens of that kingdom. And Jesus himself was the king. Now, the coming of the kingdom of God was a spiritual reality.

It was not a political thing. It was spiritual. That's perhaps why he said to Nicodemus, unless you're born again or born of the spirit, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

The kingdom was a spiritual reality, observed and entered by spiritual means. It was not a political kingdom like David's was. Now, having observed that, Jesus is saying, the kingdom has come.

And of course, if the kingdom of God has come, it is at the expense of the previous kingdom. And that's the kingdom of darkness. From the time of the fall of Adam and Eve, Satan had held unchallenged sway over the nations of the whole world.

They were his kingdom. They were the kingdom of darkness. However, it tells us in Colossians 1:13 that Christ has delivered us or translated us out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's own dear son.

This kingdom has come. Jesus is the king, and we are his citizens. We are his subjects who are his disciples.

That's what it means to be a Christian, by the way, is that you become a disciple of Jesus or a subject of King Jesus. He is your Lord and King, and you obey him just like a subject of a king obeys a king. And in doing so, you participate in the reality of his kingdom.

Now, having said that, of course, Jesus is not just talking about the kingdom in generic terms. He's speaking about a particular phenomenon associated with the kingdom, and that is the kingdom of God is hostile toward the kingdom of darkness, and the kingdom of darkness is hostile toward the kingdom of God. And the Pharisees had just suggested the theory that Jesus was casting out demons by the power of the devil.

In other words, the kingdom of the devil was being overthrown by the kingdom of the devil. And Jesus said, that doesn't make any sense. A kingdom divided against itself is not going to stand.

Why would the devil do that to himself? He said, if Satan is casting out Satan, then his kingdom is divided, and it's going to end. It can't stand. But he says, no, there's a much more reasonable explanation.

The kingdom of darkness is being attacked and overcome by an invading force, and that invading force is the kingdom of God, and the power of God's spirit is coming. And the fact that the demons are being cast out is evidence enough that this new kingdom has come, and that the old is in retreat. And that's, in fact, true.

For the past 2,000 years, the kingdom of darkness has been in retreat. Way back in the days of James, he said, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Because we are agents of the kingdom of God, and as Jesus operated in the power of the spirit of God, so do we.

And we confront the kingdom of darkness, and the kingdom of darkness is in retreat. The kingdom of God has come. The kingdom of darkness has not fully disappeared, nor has it really finished fighting.

But it has finished winning. It cannot win, because the kingdom of God has overpowered it. And it is simply a matter of the agents of the kingdom, which are God's people, continuing to spread the message of the kingdom in the places where Satan still has reigned unchallenged, and to assert by the gospel the lordship of Jesus, so that they too may be translated out of the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear son.

Now, the illustration of breaking into a man's house is very apt when we consider this scenario of the kingdom of God breaking in upon Satan's kingdom in an invasion scenario. Jesus said, how else can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. Now, Jesus doesn't take it any further.

He just gives that statement. It's an analogy. If you wish to enter the house of a strong man, and you want to steal what he has, or take from him what he has, of course, if you do so, you're very hostile.

We'd call you a burglar. Although, if the scenario is more one of wartime, it's more like you're an invasion force. The point is that you enter a strong man's house, and you take his goods only if you have disabled him.

Because if a strong man is left free to resist, he will not let you plunder his house. The fact that you can plunder his house means you've already disposed of him. The strong man who wants to defend his house has somehow been rendered incapable of resisting you.

That's why you're able to do what you're doing. Now, Jesus says all of this simply to illustrate what is going on spiritually as he is casting out demons. That Jesus can go and cast out demons with a single word is comparable to his plundering Satan's house.

Satan's possessions are there. The people that Satan has possessed are being set free. Jesus is plundering the devil's house.

He's coming in and taking his possessions from him and letting them go. It's as if he's broken into the prison house and opened all the doors, and the prisoners are getting away. Now, he says you can't do that unless you first disable the prison keeper, the man of the house, the strong man.

And what Jesus, of course, is implying is, since I am indeed plundering Satan's house, it must be concluded that I have bound Satan, or else I could not do this. Satan is clearly the strong man in the illustration, and his house is the world, or at least the kingdom of darkness, which pervades the world. And the one who comes and binds the strong man and plunders his house is Jesus.

The plundering of the house is Jesus' activity of casting out demons. Therefore, before Jesus cast out demons, he must have bound the strong man. That's the very point of his illustration.

Jesus is saying that he has bound Satan. Now, do we read of Satan being bound anywhere else in Scripture? Of course, many of you, of course, think immediately of a story, an image, I believe a symbolic drama in Revelation chapter 20, where we see Satan symbolically depicted as a dragon, and some activity symbolically described as an angel with a chain, putting a chain on the dragon, throwing him in a pit, covering it, putting a lock on it, and so forth, and binding him for a thousand years. Now, a lot of people, of course, would object to my saying it's symbolic, but it's clearly symbolic in the fact that Satan is not literally a dragon, and yet the character in the drama is a dragon.

That's a symbol. A dragon is a symbol for Satan. Satan cannot literally be bound with a

chain.

He's a spirit. A chain is not spiritual, and therefore, the idea of binding the dragon with a chain is a symbolic picture of something spiritual. It corresponds to something, but what it corresponds to is a spiritual reality.

Now, Jesus implied, in the words we're reading in Matthew 12, 29, that he had bound the strong man, and that's how he finds himself able to, without resistance, cast out demons, that is, plunder the strong man's house. The same phenomenon seems to be described in very graphic symbols in Revelation 20. This binding of Satan occurred, in my opinion, during the ministry of Jesus.

When Jesus came, he invaded the devil's stronghold, and he disabled Satan. Now, if someone wants to say, and they often do, well, how can you suggest that Jesus actually bound Satan, when, in fact, there is no evidence that Satan is bound? Satan does not appear to be bound today. Satan is active.

There are many people who still follow Satan and are under his influence, and he still is even a great problem to Christians, tempting and accusing and doing all those things that he does. So, how can one argue that Jesus bound Satan when he first came here, when Jesus first came here? Well, frankly, I don't have any problem saying it, because Jesus said it. Jesus, in this illustration, claimed that he had bound Satan and was therefore able to plunder his house without resistance.

Jesus, however, was not denying that there was still satanic activity going on in the world. Obviously, there was, even later than this. The devil entered Judas later on, after this, and even when Jesus was arrested in the garden, he said, this is your hour, and the power of darkness.

Jesus recognized that even though he had bound Satan, the binding of Satan was a symbolic illustration of something that did not mean, and was not to be construed to mean, that Satan does nothing else now, and that Satan can do nothing. To say that Satan is bound is a figurative thing. Jesus said it as an analogy.

In Revelation 20, it's a symbolic vision. The question is, what does it mean? Well, it apparently means, when Jesus talked about binding the strongman, it apparently means he rendered the strongman incapable of resistance. In other words, Jesus, when we read this illustration, we don't have to assume that Jesus literally wrestled Satan down, and wrapped his arms behind his back with a rope or a chain, and tied him to a post or a chair, or handcuffed him.

I mean, although that's the imagery that Jesus uses, the point Jesus is simply making is not necessarily that you have to literally bind the strongman, you simply have to do something like binding him, to prevent him from stopping you. He's a strong man, you

want to spoil his house, he's not going to let you do that, unless you render him incapable of resistance. And in the particular case in Matthew 12, the way in which Jesus suggests that figurative, is you bind him.

Interestingly, the same statement, or one very much like it, is found in Luke chapter 11. And let me read this, and you'll see immediately the likeness and the differences in the two statements in Luke 11 and in Matthew 12. In Luke 11, verses 21 and 22, Jesus says, when a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace.

But when a stronger than he comes upon him, and overcomes him, he takes from him all his armor in which he trusted, and divides his spoils. Now, this is the exact parallel statement in Luke, to that which we're considering in Matthew. But notice the differences.

Now, they're similar. Satan is considered a strong man, his goods are in peace, until a stronger one comes and disables him and takes his goods. Now, that's common to both passages.

One difference, though, is in Matthew, it says the stronger man comes and binds the man and spoils his house. In Luke, the imagery is a little different. The stronger one comes and takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides the spoils.

Now, the idea is the same in both. It's just different images. But both of them have something in common.

Whether you bind the strong man, or whether you simply take away his armor, you disable him. You make him incapable of resisting you. He is now at your mercy, you are not at his.

You can do what you want in his house, if you have disarmed him, or bound him, or, you know, you could think of other ways to put it. You knock him out, or something else. The idea here is that both allegories are mere imagery.

It is not to be thought that Satan literally has, you know, ropes tied around his arms and can't do anything at all. It's simply that in the terms of the illustration, Jesus has done something decisively against Satan that is comparable to binding him, or comparable to taking away his armor. In that, what Jesus has accomplished has resulted in Satan being powerless to resist him.

And so that Jesus can have his way in the world. Jesus can bring in his power and release Satan's captives, and Satan cannot stop it. And this certainly is true.

And by the way, not only does Jesus say he bound the strong man, but here in Luke he says he has taken away his armor. That's very much like what Paul said. In Colossians chapter 2, in verse 15, Paul said that Jesus disarmed principalities and powers, making a

show of them openly, triumphing over them in the cross.

That in Jesus' life and death and resurrection, there was a decisive victory over Satan, which Paul refers to as disarming the principalities and powers. Jesus referred to it as taking away the armor. Similar image, is it not? Or he also referred to it as binding.

All of these things are alternative ways of describing the same thing. Namely, that when Jesus came, it was a case of the kingdom of God invading what had once been the unchallenged territory of the kingdom of darkness. And Jesus' coming was first and foremost a disabling of the power of Satan to resist the kingdom of God, followed up by just spoiling the house.

It's reminiscent very much, I think, of what happened in the story of David and Goliath. When David killed Goliath, there was an understanding previously made that if David killed Goliath, then the Philistines lose, and that they have to serve the Israelites. If Goliath had killed David, it was the other way around.

The Israelites had to serve the Philistines. But when David killed Goliath, the fortunes of the battle were decided. The Philistines lost.

The battle was really over. It was over. The Philistines were the losers.

And they, under the agreement, had to serve the Israelites. But we don't find that the Philistines came and voluntarily surrendered. They ran away.

And the Israelites pursued them and caught up with them and spoiled them. Now, what we read here, of course, is something similar. When David slew Goliath, the battle was decided.

The victory was won. But the Israelites, the people of David, had to go and mop up. There was really no question after Goliath fell as to who was going to win the battle.

The battle was essentially over. It was just a matter of going out and enforcing the victory that was already there. Likewise, when Jesus came, he defeated Satan.

It's done. He's disarmed him. He's bound him.

Use whatever imagery you like. But the church for the past 2,000 years, or even Jesus, at the time he was casting out demons, was doing the mop-up operation, as it were. Satan was bound.

Now it's just a matter of plundering his house. It's not as if Jesus came and initiated spiritual warfare and now we're going to continue it. It's rather Jesus completed, in one sense, the spiritual warfare.

He brought the victory. He conquered the enemy. But it's simply a matter now of going

out and enforcing that victory against the recalcitrant demons and powers of darkness who have not been willing to voluntarily lay down and die.

But wherever the church goes, wherever the gospel goes, and the name of Jesus goes, and the power of the Spirit, the powers of darkness must retreat. The powers of darkness must yield. And it's always been the case, although certainly not everyone gets saved who hears the gospel, it is nonetheless the case every time the gospel penetrates new territory, there are some saved.

The devil has to lose some ground. It is the case that for 2,000 years the kingdom of darkness, because its enemy has been defeated, the kingdom of darkness is in retreat. And therefore Christ has been reigning in his kingdom ever since.

And so that's what Jesus explains is going on here. His casting out of demons is not just isolated miracles. It is a demonstration that he has conquered the power of darkness and has come in with his own kingdom to replace the kingdom of darkness.