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Considering the Source of Blessing

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Several years ago Josh McDowell authored an apologetic book entitled *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. The book was successful, went through multiple printings and is still in print today. The title of McDowell's book is a bit misleading though. As any attorney would say, evidence alone can't demand a verdict. In a trial, there are several factors that surround the issue of evidence. For example - what kind of evidence is being presented? Is it compelling (is it factual; can it be proven beyond a reasonable doubt)? Or is circumstantial (merely hearsay)? And just as critical as any evidence is the particular bias of the jury; for it is they who will ultimately consider the facts and render a final verdict. So it is with evidence and juries and verdicts in mind that we look at this morning's passage. In Luke 11:14-28, Jesus is about to enter into another series of running engagements with the religious leaders of Israel. As the Gospels tell us, when Jesus began His ministry, the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees followed Him with an attitude of reluctant curiosity. But as His popularity grew and His miracles aroused more excitement from the crowds, the religious sector began to see their own popularity decline. Their curiosity then turned to hatred as they committed to opposing Jesus which resulted, ultimately, in handing Him over to Pontius Pilate for crucifixion.

The spark that lit this powder-keg was the exorcism of a demon that had caused its victim to be struck dumb. In verse 14 Luke writes **"And (Jesus) was casting out a demon, and it was mute; when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed."** We don't know much about the demon-possessed man. Luke doesn't give us a name. He doesn't tell us where he came from or how long he had been tormented. All we know is that when Jesus performed the exorcism he was then able to speak; perhaps for the first time. And Luke tells us that upon seeing this, "the crowds were amazed." They had grown familiar with the man's condition. They were accustomed to seeing him communicate his needs by way of facial expressions, gestures and sounds that few could understand. And they had probably concluded that, beyond a stroke of God, he would never change. He would always be mute and incoherent. Then Jesus stepped into the picture and performed a healing that was truly miraculous. So they started talking amongst themselves, considering what source of power Jesus had demonstrated. This healing needed to be explained. Was it by divine intervention or

something else? This exorcism, as we will see, becomes Exhibit A in the case for Christ's identity.

"But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' Others, to test Him, were demanding of Him a sign from heaven." Some of the religious leaders attributed the source of power as coming from Beelzebul, the prince of demons. This is clearly a reference to Satan, implying that Jesus is demonically possessed. Others take a wait-and-see approach. They want more proof through some sign from heaven, like the turning back of the sun or heavenly bread from the skies. But it's clear that not all are persuaded that a demonic source is the answer.

These three possibilities may well summarize the reactions to Jesus today. Some are "amazed" by the workings of His hand. They conclude, and rightly so, that because the blind see; because marriages are restored to grace; because prisoners are set free and addicts are no longer bound to their impulses, is clear evidence that God is moving in powerful ways. People like this tend to see God in simple uncomplicated ways. Because they look forward with anticipation they are less prone to distraction. They seem to hear God's voice even when He whispers. So impacted are they by grace! Others want to see more from Him, demanding that God prove Himself in more profound ways. They refuse to acknowledge what's obvious.

If any of you saw the film *Bruce Almighty* you know what I'm talking about. Bruce is a reporter who makes a fool of himself on national television. He then loses his job, is roughed up by a street gang and has an emotional blow up with his girlfriend, Grace. With his world falling apart, he takes a midnight ride to clear his head and begins to plead with God. "Okay, God, you want me to talk with you? Then talk back. Tell me what's going on. What should I do. Give me a signal." As he speaks these words, a road construction sign, directly in front of him flashes: "Caution Ahead." But Bruce doesn't notice. "I need your guidance, Lord," he begs, "send me a sign." Immediately a large truck pulls in front of him. The back of the truck is filled with street signs which say: "Stop." "Dead End." "Wrong Way." "Do not Enter." Again Bruce is oblivious. Instead of seeing the signs, he becomes agitated that he's stuck behind this slow rumbling truck. In frustration he swerves to pass the truck while grumbling, "Lord, I need a miracle. I'm desperate. I need Your help." Losing control of the car, he spins off

the road and runs into a lamp post. When he jumps out of his mangled vehicle, Bruce flings his arms in the air in disgust and rages at God. "Fine," he shouts. "The gloves are off. Come on, let's see a little wrath. Smite me, Almighty Smiter. You're the one who should be fired. The only one around here not doing his job is you. Answer me." Now, people like Bruce can't seem to find God in the ordinary day to day realities of life. They stand underneath the beauty of His creation. They witness the miracles in the lives of others. But as for themselves, it never seems to apply. God is never enough! His grace is, therefore, taken for granted. Then there are those who reject Him outright. Like these religious leaders they refuse to believe that only God can perform miracles of healing; clearly some trickery or deception must be at work. These rejections were so insulting, so outrageous that, humanly speaking, Jesus probably should have turned away without a word. That certainly would be an action I would consider taking. It's not easy to reason with religious fools. But they were standing on the edge and Jesus cared about their souls. As David Gooding puts it: "God's finger was touching them; God was speaking to them. What they had just witnessed was a direct, unambiguous, demonstration of the Holy Spirit. Now they must make life's ultimate judgment; and they were at the point of making a decision which once deliberately made would be irreversible and make deliverance forever impossible. Reject the Holy Spirit, call Ultimate Good evil, call Truth Himself...a lie, and God Himself has no further evidence left, nothing further left to say...God Himself is reduced to silence."

But Jesus would not be silenced. He corrects the false explanations by presenting three powerful arguments that we will call Exhibit B. The first of these comes in verses 17-18 where Jesus reminds them that any division ultimately destroys a kingdom. Luke writes, "**But He knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul.'**" Jesus' response quickly shows how foolish such a conclusion is. It's as if He's saying, "Who willingly and knowingly shoots himself in the foot?" Why would Satan spend any time casting out his own demons? If Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? Not only is this unreasonable; it's ridiculous!"

Jesus then continues with His second thrust, in verses 19-20, by saying, "**And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? So they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of**

God has come upon you." Obviously there were Jews in that day who practiced exorcisms. This was widely recognized as a power given by God. Were they evil as well? Were all who cast out demons on the same turf with Satan? Jesus then drives home the point by saying, "I want you to consider the other side of the coin, the only other possibility. What if I receive my power by 'the finger of God?'" This allusion to "the finger of God" calls to mind Moses delivering Egypt by repeated displays of supernatural power, so that Pharaoh's own magicians warned him, "This is the finger of God." We are also told that after God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him two tablets of stone, written by "the finger of God." Jesus had the same power and authority. And, furthermore, He did it with the same style. It's as if He were saying, "So, if I am able to cast out this demon by the invisible but powerful finger of God, then the kingdom you have been looking for since the days of Abraham and David has come. And the door into that kingdom is standing right in front of you."

With this statement we can imagine a hush coming over the crowd. One could probably hear a pin drop. How difficult it would have been for these religious scholars to accept these words. Talk about a paradigm shift! They had expected the Messiah to come as a warrior; one who would overthrow the Roman armies and establish Israel's rule over the nations. To accept Jesus, a poverty stricken country preacher from Nazareth as that One would mean they would have to shelve their religious sensibilities, their common sense, and knowingly call black that which in every other circumstance they would have called white. Furthermore, the kingdom that Jesus was offering had nothing to do with land or power over the nations but with the human heart that desperately needed reclaiming. Once the King is invited in to set up His throne all the power necessary to restore that heart to its intended design is immediately accessible. But the Pharisees weren't getting it. And to be perfectly honest, neither do we from time to time. Just think about it—how often have we also held to a rigid dogmatism when a fresh revelation of God was standing right in front of us? I can't count the number of times I have taken what I thought to be a Godly position only to realize further down the road that I had missed the point entirely. We may not hedge on the brink of blasphemy as the Pharisees did, but we all bring a particular bias, a certain grid—one that has been shaped by countless influences—into our spiritual walk. What I've had to acknowledge is that we all have blind spots; even as Christians. God doesn't condemn us in this. But unlike the Pharisees whose posture of religious arrogance wouldn't allow new revelation, Jesus wants hearts that remain open and teachable. What I've had to learn is to continuously seek God's perspective, through His Word, through the quietness of my prayer life, and through the counsel of others, before setting any position in stone.

Jesus knew well the theological hurdles these Pharisees would need to overcome, So, with His third point, He offers them fresh revelation by way of a mini parable. **“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are undisturbed. But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder.”** The picture here is not of a household but of a well-armed castle. Before anyone can enter a guarded fortress, the guards must be overpowered. Makes sense! Only then is One able to enter in. So if Christ can gain entrance into Satan’s kingdom, it’s evident that He has greater power. The conclusion? The very fact that Christ delivered the mute man from the clutches of Satanic possession was evidence that He was not on Satan’s side, but, rather, who He claimed to be—the Son of God, the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and the One who would usher in the Kingdom of God. It’s as if Jesus was telling them, “Think, you scribes and Pharisees. Think outside the box. Don’t continue to call white black, for in doing so you risk eternal loss.”

Jesus then removes the option of spiritually neutral ground. In verse 23, He declares, **“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters.”** Now, I can’t speak for you, but I don’t see a whole lot of wiggle room here. The premise behind the Pharisee’s words and actions is that they can somehow straddle the fence, that they can wait and see before making a decision about Jesus’ identity; that there is some middle ground between siding with either God or Satan. But there isn’t. The Lord here is shaking the fence of neutrality. And every man and woman throughout history, unless suspended in animation, has fallen on one side or the other. Given the massive claims of Jesus, neutrality is, in reality, straight up unbelief. Furthermore, no one’s life is neutral in its effects. If we are not part of the gathering process, we are part of the destructive process, no matter how many philosophies we may claim. Spiritual realities haven’t changed one iota since biblical times. We are either for Christ or we’re against Him.

As the chill of these words settled in to their ears, Jesus went on in verses 24-26 to inform them that neutrality is also dangerous. There are no Switzerlands in the spiritual life. **“When the unclean spirit goes out of a man (who is without Christ as King), it passes through waterless places seeking rest (talking about the lifeless deserts of the world), and not finding any, it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order (in other words, the debris has been cleaned up from the destruction, but there is no life giving Spirit to replace it). Then it goes and takes along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.”** This is wild stuff! Jesus is pulling back the curtain of time and allowing us to see the final act of a play called The Life and Times of a Local

Demon. If I was a fence straddler in the Swiss Alps somewhere I’d be jumping straight out of my ugg, running to the nearest Christian church! In this story Jesus is using the former demoniac as an illustration of Israel’s current condition. As we have already seen in Luke’s gospel, John the Baptist had called the nation to repentance. Many Jews repented at that time and were living their new lives in the power of the Spirit. But many didn’t. Sure, they probably enjoyed a good emotional high through John’s ministry, but continued thereafter to live life in their own strength. They probably tried to get better. They most likely improved in some ways, only to find the power of the flesh quickly fading. Consequently they were worse off than before they repented. Their souls were clean but empty of any real belief in the Son of God. So they were now prime targets for more aggressive forms of demonic activity.

Here’s the principle—an empty life, like an empty house, invites intruders. Furthermore, any external efforts to change without an inward regeneration of the Spirit is an exercise in futility. Without the Holy Spirit we are pitifully inadequate, at best, to deal with the spiritual and emotional challenges of life. Do you know this as true? I’ve seen this confirmed countless times; in my own as well as other people’s experience. I’m sure you have as well. People come to church, or into a counseling process seeking to address some moral crisis or void in their lives. Over time they start cleaning themselves up. They learn to speak “christianeze.” They may even start building in weekly rituals and external supports. Now these are not bad things in and of themselves. But if we never relinquish internal control to the Lord we’ve missed the point entirely. You see, we can take steps. We can change in a lot of ways. But unless we surrender ourselves to the King we’re merely putting a band aid on something that’s requiring surgery. When we are empty and without God, any sin, any perversion, is possible. God didn’t create us to live in a vacuum. Vacuums must be filled with something. And if it’s not the Spirit of God, there’s no telling what it will be. As Dante once wrote. “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a period of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.” This contrasts sharply with the sweetness of Jesus’ words during His final days on earth when He cried out, “If anyone is thirsty, let Him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.” Living water in place of empty deserts. What a great tradeoff!

Well, Jesus’ arguments were pretty compelling. In fact, the entire scene must have been compelling, overpowering even. It’s doubtful anyone was falling asleep, there was far too much hanging in the balance. Then **“while Jesus was saying these things, one of**

the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed.' But He said, 'On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.'" As this woman had stood in the crowd and witnessed the Lord cast out the demon and then face the accusations of the Pharisees her heart must have filled with conflicting emotions. On one hand she was surely astonished. She had just witnessed the "finger of God" in a most remarkable way. And yet, she was still very much confused. Like many in that day she probably believed that the source of all blessing was a result of family heredity. Certainly the Pharisees took great pride in the fact that they were physically related to Abraham, the father of faith. So she cried out in praise, not knowing that her words were fulfilling the beatitude that Mary, Jesus' mother, had spoken in the Magnificat: "*From this time on all generations will count me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me; holy is His name.*" Certainly Mary was most blessed of women. She was great in her humility. She was great in her submission. Mary bore under her steady heart the racing heart of God. So this woman who cried out in the crowd was prophetically right. Jesus doesn't disagree. He liked what she had to say. He didn't set out to reprove her speech but improved it by saying in effect, "What you have said is right, but there is a higher truth: she who bore me was blessed, but more surely blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it."

Mary was blessed because she heard the Word of God and responded. And this beatitude rests on all who do the same. It rested on some in that crowd who heard Jesus' arguments, those who opened their hearts to Him, who became part of His kingdom. His blessings have rested on thousands ever since. This puts the highest blessing of God within reach of all of us. And there are only two steps to take: to *hear the Word of God* and to *obey it*. What does it mean to hear the Word of God?

Vincent Van Gogh once said that most people read books to borrow information to stimulate their activity, but the purpose of his reading was to "search for the man who has written them." Fortunately, we don't have to travel far to find out who has authored our story line. In the very first chapter of John's gospel we read, "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.**" What this is saying is that Jesus, Himself, is God. John calls Jesus the *logos*; which means "word." A word is a symbol which expresses thought. Our thoughts can't be communicated unless we put

them into words. In the same way, we can't know what God thinks unless He tells us through His Word. So when Jesus came among us as a man He was God's utterance on earth. And it's through Him that we can see and hear of God's love, His power, His forgiveness. He is the ultimate expression, the clearest Word God could ever speak. He came to unfold the mind of God in terms that can't be mistaken. So for us to hear the Word of God is to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to His voice.

These are the words which form the guiding principles for our lives. We live by these words, and on them; they provide the daily bread for our souls. So we have the responsibility to handle them accurately. But we have a greater responsibility—to handle them reverently. I'm convinced that what matters most to Jesus is not how pure our theology is but how reverent, how passionate our devotion. That's what He defended. That's the picture He memorialized for all time. While the Pharisees were rejecting Him and fighting over their theology women like this one were falling at the Savior's feet and slipping into the kingdom on their tears. In this way, God's Word is an open invitation to fellowship with Him. It's His love story to us as His children.

Once we've received God's Word we are then encouraged to respond to what we've heard. Now, in our culture obedience is often confused with conformity; with going along blindly and asking no questions. But obedience really means to respond appropriately. It has nothing to do with surrendering responsibility but accepting responsibility for what we respond to and how. And the litmus test is never seen in our activities or even our theological purity. It's found in this passage we've been looking at this morning. When we're tempted to doubt the source of blessing—to call what's white black, shake our heads and walk away—do we sit at the feet of Jesus and keep His Word instead? Jesus said that hearing the Word of God and keeping it is a higher blessing than Mary's blessing in giving Him birth. This is the key to all the blessings in this life and beyond. How this must have cut through all the dark objections to Jesus. This woman's cry, above the slander of the Pharisees and murmuring of the crowd, was both courageous and right. Jesus demonstrated His power. He had reasoned with the Pharisees and Scribes. He warned them. And now He gave them something to consider that must have tugged at their souls.

Well, the evidence has been presented. Yet some in the crowd were so blind they were unable to arrive at the undeniable conclusion the weight of evidence pointed to. But please don't misunderstand me. Jesus is not on trial here. Our hearts are. Eternity is what hangs in the balance. And this passage points to three simple truths that must be considered if we are to receive of God's blessings. First, we must receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. The evidence is compelling. Only Jesus has the power to invade Satanic strongholds and free its captives. Only He can usher in the

kingdom of God. Secondly, this is accomplished through trusting that Jesus is who He claims to be. We mustn't make the mistake of accepting Him as a great moral teacher but not His claims as God. As C.S. Lewis writes, "that is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else He would be the Devil himself." You must make your choice. It's impossible to be neutral about this. We are either for or against Him. And finally, we must act on what we've heard. Despite any bias to the contrary, it's just that simple. Maybe there are some of you here this morning who have yet to respond to the Lord's call on your life. Perhaps you've been straddling the fence, waiting for more evidence. Perhaps you've been "window shopping" for a Higher Power as we like to say in recovery ministry. I'd like to give you an opportunity this morning to buy into the real deal - the source of all our blessings.