

Luke 4:31-37 — Jesus Expels an Unclean Spirit

(Mark 1:21–28)

31 Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath he began to teach the people. 32 They were astonished at his teaching, because his message had authority.

33 In the synagogue there was a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon. He cried out in a loud voice, 34 “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!”

35 But Jesus rebuked the demon: “Be silent! Come out of him!” At this, the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without harming him.

36 All the people were overcome with amazement and asked one another, “What is this message? With authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” 37 And the news about Jesus spread throughout the surrounding region.

When Jesus’ lifelong friends at Nazareth realized he was not going to perform a miracle for them like he had done in Capernaum (v.23), they tried to kill him. How appropriate then that he should leave his hometown, shake the dust off his feet, and move to Capernaum!

This town flourished on the Sea of Galilee, perhaps sixteen miles from Nazareth down to the shore. It lay at the nexus of roads that led from Damascus and Syria to Jerusalem and to Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. In fact, it was situated on “the way of the sea” (Isaiah 9:1), the great caravan-road which led from the East to the Mediterranean. (Pulpit) Capernaum also was the region’s manufacturing center. (Cambridge) For all these reasons, Capernaum was an excellent strategic choice for the headquarters of a ministry that could reach far and wide.

Poole offers a fascinating insight about Capernaum: It lay in the “other” Galilee, under the jurisdiction of Philip, Herod’s brother. Historians reported that Philip’s temperament was “less bloody” than Herod – think of the slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents (Matthew 2:16) and the execution of John the Baptizer (Matthew 14:1-11). Add in the fact that Herod had taken away Philip’s wife and it was quite likely that no love was lost between the brothers. Philip’s jurisdiction therefore offered Jesus the advantage of a quieter environment for more effective ministry.

The dramatic moment Luke recounts here provides a vivid demonstration of one aspect of the messianic mission Jesus proclaimed in Nazareth: releasing the oppressed.

vv.31-32

The tumult in Nazareth’s synagogue didn’t deter Jesus from entering the place of worship at Capernaum on the very next Sabbath. Surely he was savoring these intimate times of teaching. Soon the size of his crowds would leave him no option but to teach in the open air of the countryside. (Utley)

“Amazed” — In Capernaum’s synagogue, as in the ones prior to Nazareth, the people were astonished by Jesus’ teaching. Utley notes that the Greek term (*exoplēssonto*, S1605) literally meant “struck by a blow” or “knocked beside themselves.” Gill points out that the Persian rendering of the passage reads, “He penetrated them with it.”

“Authority” — Utley explains why the people were so affected: “Jesus’ message was different (both in content and form) because he did not speak as the scribes who quoted the famous pair of rabbinical teachers, Shammai (the conservative rabbinical school) and Hillel (the liberal rabbinical school). He spoke as one who had authority in himself.”

Jesus’ teaching with authority (*exousia*, S1849) “incomparably exceeded the low and servile manner of preaching which the scribes and Pharisees commonly used, in retailing their precarious traditions and insipid comments to the people.” (Benson) Those teachings were dull repetitions of “frivolous minutiae, hair-splitting of texts, weary repetition of the sayings of the men of old.” (Pulpit)

Begg suspects many of Jesus' hearers that day "had fallen asleep routinely listening to the religious teachers of their day mumble and bumble on about the Old Testament characters. These individuals were familiar with sermons which started poorly and gradually worsened until they finally trailed away into oblivion. They had heard all kinds of talks about God and about religion, and they had deemed them trivial, legalistic, joyless, weightless, and boring." ¹

The Pulpit Commentary offers here a significant sidenote on church history:

It was with the thirty-first verse of this chapter that the great Gnostic heretic, Marcion (second century) began his Gospel, which, in the early days of Christianity, had a vast circulation. Marcion ... before putting it out as the authoritative history to be used by his numerous followers, cut out the earlier chapters of our Gospel, which bore on the birth and infancy of the Lord, commencing here – prefixing, however, a note of time, thus: "In the fifteenth year of the government of Tiberius, Jesus went down" (Marcion probably intended it to be understood "from heaven") "into the town of Galilee named Capernaum."

v.33

"Possessed by a demon" — As Jesus' revolutionary teaching began penetrating hearts and stirring the spirits of Capernaum's people, the devil tried to disrupt the Holy Spirit's work. A man possessed by a demon began shouting at the top of his voice. We will address that in the v.34 comments, but another, more critical matter must come first: *Are demons real?*

Even many non-Christians today would testify to the work of angels, but we have somehow been "enlightened" to the point that we dismiss demons as a fiction of horror films or a superstition befitting "primitive" cultures that simply don't understand what modern science has taught us. Deceive yourself with that notion, if you must, but don't dare tell that to a missionary or pastor in one of those "primitive" societies who has experienced firsthand the demonic realm's raw power. And don't dare question how much of your generation's degeneracy – and your own wickedness – might be instigated by forces beyond medicine and psychology.

“Are we, then, simply to regard these cases, not as exceptional displays of diabolical power, but as instances of sickness and disease which still exist among us? and to suppose that our Lord, in speaking of devils possessing these sick ones, accommodated himself to the popular belief, and spoke of these afflicted persons in the way men were able to understand?” (Pulpit)

If so, what then are we to make of the fact that the very Son of God not only spoke to the demons but also that they themselves spoke? Are we willing to consider that our skepticism about demons (and miracles, for that matter) is Satan’s strategy to rob Christ’s Body today of Holy Spirit power?

The simple fact is that the Gospels refer too frequently to demon possession for us to minimize the stories or dismiss them as old superstitions. We dare not place ourselves in a superior position to judge the truth of Scripture, because by doing that we cease to regard the Text as Scripture – the very Written Word of God. “The good news preached by Jesus signaled an attack on the forces of evil. A holy war was being launched and the demons knew it.” (Expositor’s)

v.34

“Ha!” — Scholars appear to have a hard time rendering the demon’s first word (ea, S1436) into English in a way that doesn’t offend the Church Lady civilities of contemporary churchgoers. The Cambridge Bible refers to it as “a wild cry of horror.” Less-civilized readers should be easily able to find a popular vulgarity that works better than the “Hey!” of the CEV or the GWT’s “Oh, no!”

“Have you come to destroy us?” — It’s not hard to hear the terror in the demon’s outburst. The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The same dread appears in the case of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:7; Matthew 8:29), where the spirits dreaded being driven into the deep, where such spirits await the judgment, that abyss, literally, ‘the bottomless place’ – any doom seemed to these lost ones preferable to that. (Pulpit) Surely this pathetic creature was aware of “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41), which was not only his destiny but also that of so-called Christians who do not give themselves to serving “the least of these.”

He also knew that the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) If only more of our complacent Christians would be possessed with such a vision of Christ's mission – and theirs.

“Let us alone.” — Was this poor man possessed by more than one demon? That is not clear here like it is in Mark 5:1-15, where Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac is recorded and one demon spoke for a legion of others in that one man. More likely, perhaps, this one demon speaks on behalf of others active on the area. “They were leagued together in the work of evil, and this one knew that if he was punished, others would also share the same fate.” (Barnes)

v.35

In v.33, we are only told “he” cried out, but now it is clear that this interaction was not between Jesus and the man. Jesus sternly commanded the demon to be silent – literally, “be muzzled.” (Cambridge)

That Jesus conversed with the evil spirit reinforces again that demonic possession is far more than disease or mental illness. Barnes asks: “How could the Son of God hold converse with ‘disease’ or ‘insanity’? But he conversed with a being who also conversed, reasoned, cavilled, felt, resisted, and knew him.”

“Be silent!” — Jesus routinely told demons to not reveal who he was. Why? The Expositor's Commentary suggests he sought to prevent the premature revelation of his identity and offers three reasons: (1) to prevent a misinterpretation that would draw to him revolutionary-minded dissidents seeking a leader against Rome; (2) to allow his messianic works themselves to establish his authority among true believers; and (3) possibly to avoid an inappropriate self-proclamation as Messiah.

“Come out of him!” — Jesus did not perform an exorcism. The rabbis performed exorcisms with magic formulas (cf. the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13-14). Jesus, however, spoke on his own authority with a simple command. And the onlookers must have been yet further astonished.

v.36

“Message ... authority and power” — ‘Message’ is a popular rendering among contemporary translations, but it seems a weak sister to the original language’s *logos* (S3056). This word is the Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God. This is the Word that became flesh and made His dwelling among us. (John 1:1-14)

Gill likes the Ethiopian rendering of the people’s question: “What is this commanding word?” And the NLT wonderfully captures the entire sentiment of this verse: “Amazed, the people exclaimed, ‘What authority and power this man’s words possess!’”

This time Luke notes not only the amazement of the people at Jesus’ authoritative teaching but also the miraculous power (*dynamei*, S1411) exploding from his words. The power to cast out devils with a simple word was new to these people. (Barnes) That Jesus could command the obedience of demons provided “an indubitable proof that his doctrine was attended with an extraordinary power.” (Benson) Not only were Jesus’ claims about himself radical and unexpected, but he backed up those claims with his actions! (Utley)

v.37

News (*ēchos*, S2279) of this astonishing, first-of-its-kind event could not help but spread like wildfire through the entire area. Word of Jesus’ power over unclean spirits, as well as his physical healings, caused great excitement and large crowds began to seek out this miracle worker. (Utley)

When Jesus set this man free from demonic oppression, he proved himself sovereign over the spiritual world. Jesus’ powerful words not only pierced human hearts but commanded demons as well. That fact, Edgar wrote, should comfort us as we face spiritual opposition:

The restoration of human nature to freedom from demoniacal temptation is one great object of the Saviour’s work. Clothing men in their right mind again, enabling them to think and act for themselves, and to resist the subtle temptations to impurity and sin – this is a glorious function of the Holy One of God!

¹ <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/jesus-the-preacher/>