

The Parable of the Strong Man and the Stronger One (Matthew 12:22-32; Mark 3:22-30; Lk. 11:14-23)

Introduction

In the temptation narrative (Matt. 4:1-11), Jesus experienced a victory over Satan, this narrative set the pattern for His subsequent ministry. Jesus' response to the various temptations demonstrate that Jesus aimed to elicit faith in Himself quite apart from any outside pressure. Whereas God's first son (Israel) had disobeyed, Jesus demonstrated obedience by His submission to the Father's will and thereby experienced triumph over the power of Satan. The texts that Jesus used from Deuteronomy in the temptation account, clearly point us back to a similar situation and to parallel threats to faith that Israel experienced on their wilderness journey. In the narrative, Jesus refused to work spectacular signs for Himself; later in His ministry, He likewise refused to effect signs which would cause amazement, but fail to engender genuine faith. On more than one occasion, His critics will seek a sign from Him (Matt. 12:38; Jn. 2:18; 6:30; Lk. 23:8).

His avoidance of popular "press" carries over into His encounter with demons; the "silence" of Jesus with demonic forces is striking. He commands silence from the demons and from those who are cured as well. At the same time, we discover a remarkable contrast between the popular and the demonic estimate of Jesus. The crowds wonder if He can possibly be David's son.¹ The Pharisees swear categorically that His work is inspired by Beelzebul, the Prince of the demons. But the demons themselves clearly know who He is. Yet, Jesus silences their confession. A genuine response of faith can never issue from demonic forces nor should their confession be allowed to compel human confession; it can only come from people. "Genuine" means that it is not forced, but spontaneous. Jesus is a "hidden" Messiah who elicits and draws out the response of trust, but will not force faith upon the beholders.

We come, therefore, to the actual conflict that Jesus carries on with the unclean spirits during His public ministry. The Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as a prophet, teacher, miracle-worker, and also as an *exorcist*. In the exorcism narratives, we sense something of the mystery of "spiritual" evil as we witness the havoc and devastation that demons wreak upon possessed people. It is clear that Jesus' power over unclean spirits proclaimed the nearness of the Kingdom of God. His conflict with the demoniacs was not accidental or incidental, but was a vital part of His concern for the wholeness of the human person.

At this point, a host of questions come to the surface: How bound was/is Satan? How did Jesus' exorcisms differ from the exorcisms of others? What happened in the Gospel exorcisms? How can Christians today avoid both an apathy about and an undue preoccupation with Satan's existence and destructive power in the lives of others? How

¹ Normally the question with μήτι expects the negative answer, i.e., "This *can't* be the Son of David, *can he?*" However, as Robertson notes, "It is only the *expectation* that is presented by οὐ or μή." Robertson draws the parallel with the woman at Jacob's well (Jn. 4:29), "She refused to arouse opposition by using οὐ and excited their curiosity by μή," ("Can (μήτι) this be the Christ?"). A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 917.

do we recognize the way or ways in which he works today? What role does exorcism have in the life of the Church?

A text that may help us answer these questions is the Parable of the Strong Man and the Stronger One, found in a paragraph where the source of Jesus' power is under attack by the Pharisees (Matt. 12:22-30). This paragraph also offers a revealing picture of how Jesus understood His exorcisms.

The Larger and Immediate Context

The paragraph is found within the larger context of Book III² of Matthew which extends from 11:2-13:52. All of Book III builds upon Jesus' Galilean ministry including several controversy stories. Throughout the pericope, the Kingdom of God is announced in *action* (12:2-50) and by *word* (13:1-52). A clear distinction is drawn between the disciples and Jesus' critics. The people who seize the Kingdom are aggressive in their faith response (11:12) and are able to hear the Baptist's message (vss. 14-15). In sharp contrast, the critics play make-believe, like spoiled children, berating both John and Jesus. Jesus proceeds to pronounce fearful judgments upon the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (vss. 20-24) because of their unbelief, yet, He praises the Father for revealing Himself to the "little ones," a description which certainly includes the disciples (11:25). Disciples are receptive to God's Word. Contrariwise, the Pharisees ("the wise and understanding") are intent upon burdening others with regulatory laws (11:28a) while Jesus is the burden-bearer (11:28b-30). The distinction between disciples and critics occurs again in ch. 12:1-8; disciples are accused of plucking grain on the Sabbath and Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (vss. 9-13), and Jesus' life is put in jeopardy (12:14).

After healing the man with the withered hand, Jesus withdraws from the synagogue (12:15-21). Matthew uses the Servant Song (Isa. 42:1-4) to affirm the quiet and unobtrusive nature of Jesus' ministry, and to announce its inclusion of the Gentiles. The parallel section in Mark 3 occurs in the context of Jesus' tremendous popularity. Amidst His miracles and the confession of His identity by demons (3:7-12), Jesus formally appoints the twelve: 1) to be with Him, 2) to be sent out to preach, and 3) to have authority to cast out demons.

Matthew relates how accusation and division are immediately followed by a sharp break with opponents concluding with the accusation that Jesus uses the power of Beelzebul to exorcise demons (12:22-32).

The theme of contrasting responses is carried through Book III with a discussion of good and evil fruit (12:33-37), the demand for a sign (vss. 38-42), and with the comparison of the present generation to the last state of a man who had formerly been exorcised. The concluding paragraph of ch. 12 contrasts the physical family of Jesus--standing *outside*, wanting to speak to Jesus with those eager persons around Jesus--seated *inside* (v. 49; Mk. 3:34). The final sequence of Book III is comprised of seven parables (ch. 13) of the Kingdom of Heaven (God), explaining both the nature of God's reign/rule and the appropriate response to it. A broad parabolic teaching is offered to the crowds,

² Book I (3:1-7:29); Book II (8:1-11:1).

but a precise explanation is shared only with disciples. The contrast between the insider and the outsider is hereby underscored again.

Structural Analysis of the Parable

The following outline reflects the structure of Matt. 12:22-32, the paragraph containing the Parable of the Strong Man and the Stronger One.

Introduction and occasion--an exorcism (Matt. 12:22)

Response of the crowd to the exorcism (v. 23).

Response of Jesus' family (Mark 3:21)

Response of the Pharisees to the exorcism--accusation (Matt. 12:24).

Jesus' refutation of the accusation (vss. 25-26)

By the divided Kingdom principle (vss. 25-26).

Jewish exorcists (v. 27).

Meaning and source of Jesus' exorcisms (v. 28).

The Parable of the Strong Man and Stronger One (v. 29).

Severe pronouncements upon the accusers (vss. 30-32).

Translation

Introduction and occasion--an exorcism (v. 22). 22 Then, there was brought to him a demon-possessed man, blind as well as dumb, and he healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw.

Response of the crowd to the exorcism (v. 23). 23 And all the crowds were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"

(Response of Jesus' family (Mark 3:21). And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is beside himself.")

Response of the Pharisees to the exorcism--accusation (Matt. 12:24). 24 But when the Pharisees heard it they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

Jesus' refutation of the accusation (vss. 25-26). *By the divided kingdom principle (vss. 25-26).* 25 Knowing their thoughts, he [Jesus] said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; 26 and if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?"

Jewish exorcists (v. 27). 27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.

Meaning and source of Jesus' exorcisms (v. 28). 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

The Parable of the Strong Man and Stronger One (v. 29). 29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Severe pronouncements upon the accusers (vss. 30-32). 30 He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. 31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but

whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Interpretation

Introduction and occasion--an exorcism (v. 22). The specific occasion for the accusation that Jesus is possessed by Satan is an actual exorcism in Matthew (see Mk. 3:22) of a man who is both blind and dumb. Few of the healings and exorcisms in the Gospels are told as quickly as this one. We read that Jesus “healed” the man, that is, He exorcised the demon(s), with the result that the man was able both to speak and hear. Mark's context differs; Luke states only that the man was dumb (Lk. 11:14).

Response of the crowd to the exorcism (v. 23). A miracle has occurred but the response to it is varied. The crowd asks, “Can this be the Son of David?”³ The Messianic title “Son of David” occurs eight other times in Matthew's Gospel.⁴ While the crowd does not make a clear verbal confession, nonetheless the question of Jesus' identity as “Son of David” is raised. The title “Son of David” is used in a Messianic sense and may also convey an allusion to David as an exorcist who, by means of music on his lyre, drove away the evil spirit from Saul:

1 Sam. 16:23 And whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the *evil spirit* departed from him.

Luke's Gospel does not give us the question, but simply narrates the response of the people--marvel (Lk. 11:14).

(Response of Jesus' family [Mk. 3:21]). Although Mark's Gospel does not relate an actual exorcism, it does imply that an exorcism occurred (cf. Mk. 3:22). It does record, however, that Jesus' preoccupation with the needs of others suggests to His family that He has lost his mind, and accordingly, “they sought to seize Him.” This lesser concern and charge of Jesus' family is used as a foil to introduce the far more severe charge of the scribes “who had come from Jerusalem.”⁵

Response of the Pharisees to the exorcism--accusation (Matt. 12:24). The stinging charge against Jesus' character issues from the Jerusalem Scribes (Mark 3:20-22). They make a double accusation against Jesus when they say: 1) Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul⁶ and 2) He effects exorcisms by Beelzebul's power. The second charge is the main accusation. The critics cannot doubt the reality of the cure (the man can speak and see), but they assign the source of Jesus' power to the Prince of demons. In the phrase “by Beelzebul,” the preposition “by” (ἐν-v.22) corresponds in usage to the Hebrew inseparable preposition בִּ- It expresses the *means* by which they claim Jesus performs the cure. The preposition can also convey the sense of “by the help of,” “in the

³ The question is rhetorical.

⁴ 1:20; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30; 20:31; 21:9, 15; 22:42; there are seven other occurrences of the proper name, “David” (1:1, 6, 17--twice; 12:3; 22:43, 45).

⁵ presumably to ascertain the credibility of Jesus so as to report back to the Sanhedrin.

⁶ The name Beelzebul, Beelzebub has been variously rendered as “Lord of the flies,” i.e., as the “Lord of the dung-heap” where flies congregate. But in view of Jesus' parable on the house of the Strong One, the more appropriate rendering of the name is, “Lord of the Dwelling.” In two of the Synoptics, the term, “house” (οἰκία) is used (Matt. 12:29; Mk. 3:27).

name of,” “under the authority of.” Frequently in exorcisms, it was necessary to adjure the demons by the name of the Greater One--God, whose name was also a means of cure. Mark's account is preceded by the response of the demoniacs, identifying Jesus as "the Son of God" (Mk. 3:11); His exorcisms proceed from the fact of His divine sonship.

The accusation is a strange one: that Jesus casts out demons with demonic help. In ancient magic, it was well-known that a conjurer could drive out weaker spirits by his own power. But here it is stated that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul and expels evil spirits with his aid. Jesus is accused of collusion with Beelzebul, wherein both the exorcist and demon(s) work together to deceive the onlookers. Ostensibly, the purpose of such collusion would be to inspire confidence in the power of the exorcist; therefore, the chief demon would be the master of Jesus and not his servant. Thus, the Scribes accuse Jesus of enhancing His reputation as a miracle worker and exorcist through “staged” exorcisms. In their logic, Beelzebul then misleads people to believe that Jesus is the master over the demons, when, in fact, Jesus is Beelzebul’s passive and obedient servant.

Jesus' refutation of the accusation (Matt 12: 25-29). By a series of logical statements, Jesus points to the foolishness of their accusation and to the utter absurdity of their thoughts. For the sake of clarity, Jesus' argument may be outlined under several headings:

By the divided kingdom principle (Matt. 12: 25-26). The argument that Jesus uses is called in Latin logic, *reductio ad absurdum*, i.e., "reasoning to the absurd," which involves taking a faulty premise and explicating its logical inferences to the point where they become obviously absurd. Three parallel clauses are laid out, using four different subjects, which are objects of "in-house" fighting, which lead to a negative result, which is not the case.

Subject	"In-house" fighting	Negative result
25 every kingdom	divided against itself	is laid waste,
city or house	divided against itself	will [not] stand
26 if Satan casts out Satan,	he is divided against himself;	how then will his kingdom stand?

Jesus' question in v. 26 is rhetorical and serves as an explicit statement as to how His exorcisms are not done. In effect, Jesus says, "I am accused of using demonic power for the expulsion of demons. But this clearly would involve the break-up of the demonic world, in accordance with usual human experience of seditious activity. Now it is clear that the empire of Satan still holds out (this assumption is necessary to the argument): therefore I do not cast out demons by Beelzebul, but in some other way."⁷

Human experience usually shows that any kind of social organization ("kingdom, city, or house") is threatened ("will not stand") when there is factionalism ("in-house" fighting--"against itself"). Jesus assumes that the empire and kingdom of Satan still stands (v. 26)--a view shared by Jesus' critics. After all, sin, sickness, demon-possession and death continue to be present realities. Since Satan is not interested in bringing about his own demise, the exorcism by Jesus cannot be by Satan's power for Satan is not such a fool as to do himself in.⁸

⁷ C.K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit in the Gospel Tradition* (London: S P C K, 1947), p. 61.

⁸ Manson, Major, Wright, *Mission and Message of Jesus*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938), p. 377.

Satan's kingdom is strong; it is still standing and has a strong man within, but it also shows very real signs of weakening, notably in Jesus' exorcisms. However, the point of Jesus' argument is that the break-up and demise of Satan's kingdom does not happen from internal factions, i.e., "in-house" fighting.

Jewish exorcists (v. 27). Another point of Jesus' argument lies in the current practice of the Jewish "sons," i.e., the Pharisees' disciples. Exorcism is not a new phenomenon with Jesus. In the Rabbinic literature, there are many allusions to demons and their harmful activity among people. According to Acts 19:13-14, exorcism is carried out by the sons of Sceva:

13 *Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists* undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

14 *Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.*

Josephus makes a comment about King Solomon and his ability as an exorcist:

He left behind him, the manner of using exorcisms, by which they drive away demons, so that they never return and this method of cure is of great force unto this day.⁹

Josephus then proceeds to describe an exorcism which he had seen performed by a Jew in the presence of the emperor Vespasian. The demon gave evidence of his departure by upsetting a bowl of water.

In the legendary book of Tobit, a demon succumbs to the smoke of the heart and liver of a fish, applied under the direction of the angel Raphael (Tobit 8:1-3).

Jesus' critics do not question the validity of exorcism as if this were something altogether new. They attack the source--not the practice.

Meaning and source of Jesus' exorcisms (v. 28). Jesus then affirms the truth about the source of His exorcisms. His exorcisms are accomplished by the Spirit of God and signify the presence of God's Kingdom:

Matt. 12:28 But if it is *by the Spirit of God* that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Lk. 11:20 But if it is *by the finger of God* that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

It is not the fact of exorcisms *per se* that distinguishes Jesus from Jewish exorcists, but the fact that He, as *Messiah* ("I"), is casting out demons by the Spirit of God.¹⁰ As the anointed Messiah, exorcism becomes a manifestation of His Messianic activity. Thus, His exorcisms are not magical wonders or haphazard miracles in answer to the prayer of a holy man, but are signs that Jesus is doing His Messianic work. In Mark 1:27, when Jesus casts out demons in the Capernaum synagogue, the people are amazed at His exceptional authority over demons. The context suggests that He possesses such power by virtue of His identity, "the Holy One of God" (1:24).

⁹ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, VIII, 2, 5.

¹⁰ A similar thought is present at the Baptism of Jesus. The presence of the Kingdom does not rest with Jesus alone, since He is now thirty years old, or the Spirit alone, since the Spirit of God was active in Israel's history. Since He is anointed by the Spirit and confirmed by the voice from above (Mk. 1:10-11), it is not surprising that Jesus' first word in public proclaims, "The Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:14-15).

The authority vested in Jesus comes from the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28). Luke's text says that He exorcises demons by the "finger of God." That Luke's form may be more original lies in the fact that Luke is the Evangelist who emphasizes the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he would doubtless have retained the reading, "The Spirit of God," if it had been in the source he used. If the expression "finger of God" (Luke), is the original reading, it can only be a metaphorical expression for the Spirit of God.

For understanding the "finger of God" metaphor, T. W. Manson suggests an allusion to Exodus 8:19, where Moses is contrasted with the Egyptian magicians and the finger of God is contrasted with the power of demons. Upon beholding Moses' miracle, the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." This notion connecting divine power with a finger that touches the human world can apparently be found in Egyptian culture. Flinders Petrie, for example, points to an Egyptian inscription of "a wood carving of a finger springing from a falcon's head. The head was a symbol of Ra and Horus...a familiar image in Egypt."¹¹

Jesus' exorcisms are not isolated or incidental invasions into the kingdom of Satan; rather, they express the present and powerful reality of the Kingdom's presence. They also mark the beginning of the end, the annihilation of Satan, a sobering realization which the demons acknowledge.¹² As Jeremias notes, "Every occasion on which Jesus drives out an evil spirit is an anticipation of the hour in which Satan will be visibly robbed of his power. The victories over his instruments are a foretaste of the eschaton."¹³ Thus, in Matthew 8, as the Gadarene demoniacs confront Jesus, they cry out in terror:

Matt. 8:29 And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us *before the time*?"

They sense clearly that Jesus is the instrument of their final destruction.

The Parable of the Strong Man and Stronger One (v. 29). Jesus then speaks a parable that affirms the reality of both the Strong Man and Stronger One. In essence, Jesus says, "You should have realized that no one can enter the Strong One's house and ransack his goods, unless He first binds the Strong Man." This can only happen through an exercise of superior strength by a still stronger man, one who is able to overpower and tie up the Strong Man. In brief, Jesus is the Stronger One who has come and bound up Satan. Strangely enough, the Strong Man, though bound, still exercises power.

We may see in this parable a word of confirmation to the people who are asking the question whether Jesus is Messiah, i.e., "the Son of David." The term "Stronger One" is also a Messianic designation, since John the Baptist had promised that "One Stronger than I is the Coming One"¹⁴ who will baptize in the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11). In

¹¹ Flinders Petrie, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 69.

¹² Mk. 1:24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come *to destroy us*? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

¹³ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 95.

¹⁴ The term, "the Coming One" is also a Messianic allusion:

Matt. 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but *he who is coming* after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. See also Matt. 21:9 where the term "Son of David" is also linked with the "*One who Comes* in the name of the Lord:

21:9 And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the *Son of David!* Blessed is He who Comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah, we also find a link between the Servant of the Lord and the idea of sharing booty with the strong:

Isaiah 53:12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great,
 and
he shall divide the strong ones¹⁵ as spoil
 because he poured out his soul to death,
 and
 was numbered with the transgressors;
 yet
 he bore the sin of many,
 and
 made intercession for the transgressors.

The influence of this and other Servant Songs is strong in Jesus' self-understanding and mission. Indeed the language of a Servant Song (Isa. 42:1-4) is used in the passage that immediately precedes our exorcism narrative (12:18-21) and is especially reflected in the quiet and unobtrusive way in which Jesus carries out His ministry of healing. He may well indicate here, "I am the Servant of the Lord who accomplishes the work of binding up the Strong One and dividing the spoil--ransacking the house of the Strong One." Every occasion of exorcism, as in Matt. 12:23, is an occasion of ransacking the property of the Strong One. The Strong Man exercises His dominion over sin, sickness, possession and death. The mission of Jesus means that the Messiah (Stronger One) has come, overcoming and plundering the spoils of Satan. He frees those who are enslaved by Satan, and in so doing, He destroys the power of the evil one. Satan's defeat, clearly evident in the exorcisms of Jesus, means freedom and wholeness for the demon possessed persons. But it is all the work of the Messiah, who will also be the agent of the demons' final destruction.

Severe pronouncements upon the accusers (vss. 30-32). The narrative of the exorcism, accusation and response lead to the very severe pronouncements. The following table illustrates how the present condition results in a corresponding judgment:

Condition	Judgment
30 He who is not with me and he who does not gather with me	is against me, scatters.
31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy but the blasphemy against the Spirit	will be forgiven men, will not be forgiven.
32 And whoever says a word against the Son of man but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit	will be forgiven; will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come

Through the antithetical clauses, Jesus underscores the severity of the Pharisees' charge against the Holy Spirit. Yet, He affirms openly that blasphemy, i.e., abusive speech

¹⁵ The Hebrew text includes the sign of the direct object, which the RSV and NRSV interpret as a preposition, "with the strong."

against Himself, the Son of Man, will be forgiven but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. His critics, the Jerusalem Scribes, reveal a blindness that cannot distinguish between the work of Jesus that brings wholeness and the work of Satan that brings destruction and death.

In another context, Jesus speaks openly of sins of sensuality and other evil acts (Mk. 7:21-23). What evil is more heinous than the malignant moral blindness which affirms that good is evil? This warning is perhaps the strongest word that Jesus ever spoke. The direct context, found in the tradition of all three Synoptic writers shows clearly the charge against Jesus: that He accomplishes exorcisms by the power of Beelzebul. For those who held this view, there is, says Jesus, no hope. One whose moral vision is so confused and distorted as to see no difference between good and evil or one who knowingly calls good--evil, is beyond remedy.

Application

We need to sense the tension inherent in the idea of Satan being bound and yet strong. Jesus won a victory in the Temptation but this does not mean that Satan's power is finished. Luke's account states that the Devil left Him until "a more opportune moment" (Lk. 4:13). Likewise in the above parable (Matt. 12:29), Jesus clearly infers that Satan's power is still strong. Even after the Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension--when the victory is complete, the grip of Satan, even though broken, is still powerful. Therefore, a tension appears similar to that which appears when the claim, "the Kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28), is set in contrast to the prayer, "Let your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). These tensions will not be resolved till the Parousia. To be sure, victory over the Evil One occurred during the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. When the seventy return from their short-term missionary trip, Jesus says, "I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Lk. 10:18). His words affirm that victory is happening and the end of Satan's power is now in sight. The judgment on Satan is decreed and his temptations and power against Jesus cannot prevail. Judgment in full, however, has not yet been carried out. Only with the Parousia will there be an end to all evil.

During this intermediate period, the activity of the enemy will continue to increase. Not only did Jesus hold this view, but the Early Church held it as well. In fact, the Church believed that demonism would attain its greatest manifestation before the final crisis (II Thess. 2). Jesus sensed that the activity of Satan would increase not only in clear-cut demonic responses, but in the lack of receptivity on the part of the people, including a hostility that would bring about His death. Satan's power was clearly operative during the ministry of Jesus:

Lk. 22:3 Then *Satan entered* into Judas called Iscariot,

31 "Simon, Simon, behold, *Satan demanded to have you*, that he might sift you like wheat,

53 When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and *the power of darkness.*"

The dark powers are on the move; they plan to destroy the fruits of Jesus' Messianic ministry. Jesus went to meet His death with the conviction that Satan inspired the enmity

against Him (Jn. 8:44) and that Satan's triumph would mean his undoing (Jn. 12:31-32; 16:11).

Accordingly, it was only through Jesus' death that the enemy's power over the people of God could be broken. It was to be an incredible paradox that He, who was Stronger than the Strong Man, should apparently, be found in the power of the Strong Man. He is the object of temptation and trial and yet, it is He who speaks with and casts out demons with authority. We see a real balance between the active and passive elements in the life of Jesus. His strength lies in His submission to the will of His father even in His apparent failure.

Lest we think that the parable about binding the strong man refers only to the first century, a student of mine, Gopal Kunji Kanan from Malaysia tells the following story. As a child he was exposed to witchcraft and spirits which kept his people in constant fear. Often when people became upset with others, e.g., envy, misunderstanding, they sought a witch doctor to cast a spell on their opponent. Gopal's mother was a Hindu at that time and possessed many family idols, i.e., "gods." One day she told Gopal that someone had cast a spell on their family and explained to him the process which includes binding the "gods" in the house before the spirits or spells can gain entrance and wreak destruction in the Kanan household. Gopal was deeply puzzled about his prior instruction in Hinduism which affirmed an all-powerful "god," yet, his household gods ("idols") were really impotent in the face of a shaman's paid services. After Gopal became a Christian, a witch doctor came to his house and spoke to Gopal about spells, the binding of spirits, and the customary procedure. When the witch doctor prayed for a sick person or anyone affected by the spell, he instructed the spirit that worked for the witch doctor to negotiate with the spirit that caused the sickness, and may provide relief for a short period. The witch doctor is paid for his services. Normally, after a short lapse of time, the sickness returns worse than before; therefore, the ritual must be repeated with additional payment to the shaman. The parable was perfectly understandable and natural to Gopal upon his reading of the text of Matt. 12:22-30.

The narrative underscores the importance of exorcism in Jesus' ministry, an emphasis that is common to other texts as well.¹⁶ His work as an exorcist belongs to the bedrock of the Gospel tradition. Exorcism is not simply introductory to the Kingdom of God, but is a powerful sign of the presence of the Kingdom, bringing wholeness of life to those who are possessed by the power of Satan.

As the people of God we need to be alert to the reality of Satan's destructive power and sensitive to the way in which we can cooperate with the Spirit of God to bring new life to those individuals who are possessed. The fact that Jesus entrusted His

¹⁶ A warning to Herod is found which notes almost incidentally Jesus' exorcisms:

Lk. 13:32 And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, *I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.*

We also find the record of the strange exorcist who uses Jesus' name but is not one of the twelve:

Lk. 9:49 John answered, "Master, we saw a man *casting out demons in your name*, and we forbade him, because he does not follow with us."

In a similar way, Paul uses the name of Jesus Christ to perform exorcism:

Acts 16:18 And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in *the name of Jesus Christ* to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

disciples with a mission similar to His (Mk. 3:15) and that the early Church continued with a ministry of exorcism (Acts 5:16), confirms the role of the Church in delivering people from the power of the Strong One. Paul clearly affirms the rise of demonism in the "last days" when he warns the Church against those who "abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (I Tim. 4:1). Those individuals of the Church gifted with discernment are enabled to recognize the alien forces that take up residence within people. Through a ministry of exorcism, the Church can help to create wholeness and freedom that signifies the presence of the Kingdom of God.