

# Confronting Evil

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Biblical Text: Acts 19: 13-17

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.

During our brief visit here we have been discussing some of the great problems that afflict the world today. We have talked about overpopulation, world hunger, unjust distribution of wealth, sexist discrimination, lack of educational opportunities, and many similar problems.

At the end of all these discussions, we often come away with a sense of frustration and bewilderment. We do not see easy solutions. Although shipping tons of grain overseas might keep some people from starving, and is therefore an act of Christian compassion, it hardly addresses the fundamental causes of world hunger. We could try the route of education, thinking that the problems of the world will be solved by better schooling. But we shall soon discover that it is not so, and that often the better educated use that very training as a means to exploit and subjugate others. Or we could say that what we need to do is send missionaries and convert people. And here again we would be fulfilling one of the fundamental tasks of the

Christian Church. But, again, the history of Christian missions is full ven of cases when even the best intentioned missionaries have quite unwittingly destroyed significant and valuable elements of a people's culture, style of life, and even livelihood.

In one word, before the problem of evil in our time we stand perplexed. There was a time thirty or forty years ago when we would boldly have ventured into simple solutions to these problems. But today we are overawed by their complexity, by their immensity, by our inability really to grapple with them.

This has many consequences for our lives as Christians today. But one such consequence—and a very unexpected one—is that we are beginning to be able to sense something of what the Bible means when it speaks of demons.

I am not saying that we can somehow jump back twenty centuries, forget about germs, psychoses, and hormones, and speak naively as if evil spirits floating in the aff were the cause of all our plagues and problems.

What I am saying is that, in the midst of our perplexity before our own most urgent problems, we can empathize with a view that sees evil, not only as something which we ourselves create, but also as something of such magnitude and mysterious complexity that we are unable to grapple with it in an effective manner. And, after all, that is, at least in part, what is meant by

the Biblical imagery regarding demons. In some ways, the mysterious twin giants of overpopulation and world hunger are much more demonic and fearsome than some little devil floating around with horns and a pitchfork.

If it is true that most of us have left behind a view of the world as populated by demons and other such powers, it is also true that now we must also leave behind our optimistic and simplistic view of a few years ago, when we thought we had the world and the future in our hands. It is still true that we cannot escape responsibility for our world nor for our future. We cannot simply say “The Devil made me do it.” But it is also true that the more seriously we take that responsibility the more we tend to be perplexed by its overpowering complexity and magnitude.

At this juncture, then, it may be good to look once again at the New Testament and see what it has to say about how we are to face the demonic powers which are loose upon the world. It may well be that some of its insights may help us understand the nature of our Christian struggle against such demons as world hunger, overpopulation, and the like.

The text for today is not one that is often used in contemporary preaching. As a matter of fact, only once before have I heard a sermon on this text. I have heard quite a few sermons on demons—believe me. Most of them are quite bad. But usually not on this text.

The reason for this may well be that here we have to deal with a sarcastic demon, and most people who are inclined to preach on demons do not have a very keen sense of humor!

Let us briefly retell the story as the book of Acts narrates it. Paul had been preaching for two years at Ephesus. His main function there was not exorcism. His function was the preaching of the Gospel. But that preaching was accompanied by such signs that some professional itinerant exorcists thought that the name of Jesus could somehow be added to their professional bag of tricks, as a specially powerful one. So, they went into this house, seven exorcists together, and attempted to cast out a demon with a strangely noncommittal formula: "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." To which the demon answered, with marked sarcasm: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" And then, to add not insult to injury, but injury to insult, the man in whom the demon was jumped on them and gave them a sound thrashing.

In some ways this text depicts our present condition as Christians in the face of evil. For indeed a great deal of what we hear coming back at us as we seek to destroy evil has the same sarcastic overtones of this demon's words: "Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who are you?" The world at large acknowledges that the teachings of Jesus have something to do with world hunger and social injustice. But the world also sees that it is easy to introduce a wedge between those teachings and us. And therefore, in a hundred different ways, when we make our social pronouncements, when we gather food for the hungry, we still hear the same sarcastic words: "And just who do you think you are?" "On what authority are we to believe you!"

If we then look at the text afresh, not simply as a matter of antiquarian curiosity, but rather listening to what God might have to say to us in our present predicament, several things stand out.

The first of these is that the powers of evil know and acknowledge the power of Jesus. “Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who are you?” This is a theme which may be difficult for us to envisage, but which runs throughout the entire New Testament. As a matter of fact, it is a theme so central to the message of the New Testament, that without it it is impossible to understand that message correctly. For what the New Testament says is not simply Jesus that did miracles. The most important thing that the New Testament says about Jesus is that throughout his life and death he faced the strongest forces evil could muster, and that he came out a winner. Evil may still be running rampant in the world. But its ultimate force has been taken away, in that One has already conquered it. Death has been overcome, sin has been overcome, death has been overcome. Thus, the most important thing to overcome the New Testament says about Jesus is that in him a new era has dawned, and that the culmination of this new era will be the final destruction of all powers of evil. The powers of evil know the power of Jesus. What this means is that the word of evil is not the final word; that evil will be overcome; that in some mysterious way which the eyes of faith can perceive we are already enjoying the first fruits of the new creation. It may be difficult for us to see this. It may be difficult for me to see this. It may be difficult for conceptual reasons, since this is not our normal way of thinking. It may also be difficult because it is not often that we see around us any signs

that a new era has indeed dawned. But this is the core of the Christian faith. If we do not somehow believe and experience this, no matter how dimly, our relationship to the fundamental events of the New Testament is little more than hearsay and second-hand, like those exorcists who felt compelled to disassociate themselves from those events by saying: “the Jesus whom Paul preaches.”

The second thing that this text shows us is that the powers of evil may also know some rather disconcerting things about us. The question “but who are you?” signifies certainly a lack of recognition. But it also implies that the powers of evil are aware of the distance which stands between these exorcists and Jesus, precisely because they recognize the weakness of their claim to the name of Jesus.

This is something which we too experience as we set out to do battle with the evils of today's world. And so we hear: “you are going to solve the problem of world hunger, you whose garbage cans are full of good food?” “You want to deal with world hunger, you who insist on grain-fed beef several times a week?” “Are you really concerned with the miseries of overpopulation, or are you mostly afraid of what it might do to the present world order, in which you have such a comfortable place?” “Jesus we know; and perhaps even Paul; but who are you?”

Finally, this text tells us that, if we are to deal effectively with the powers of evil, the only way to

do it will be by claiming—really claiming—the name of Jesus. This may sound terribly trite in the modern world. Indeed, it has become trite. But it has been made such, not so much by the skepticism of the modern world, as by the faithlessness of those who call ourselves Christian. It has become trite because we have attempted to claim the name of Christ second-hand, the easy way, like the exorcists in our text.

But in order to be able to claim the name of Jesus—really to claim the name of Jesus—and to find in that name power to fare the evil of our time, we have to be participants in the victory of Jesus. Which is to say that we have to be participants in his life and death.

This is the function of worship. We often hear that worship is the place where we come to praise God and to hear the Word of God. And this is true. But worship is much more than that. Worship is the means by which we are so united to the saving events of the life of Jesus Christ that his power becomes our power. It is for this reason that the early church spoke of baptism as our dying with Christ and being raised again with him in power. It is for this reason also that the early church saw in communion a means whereby such union is achieved with Christ that we are participants in his victory. For this reason, too, communion was seen also as a foretaste of the final banquet which will take place in the kingdom, when all evil will be finally overcome and there will be no more hunger. Likewise, when the early church spoke of itself as the body of Christ it meant that it was a body whose head had been raised from the dead, a body whose head had conquered evil, and therefore a body in which this experience of victory could be lived

even in the midst of the present strife.

Up to this point it all sounds very easy. All we have to do is be united with Christ, and we shall share in his victory.

But there is a catch. For the Christ with whom we must be united is not unacquainted with the powers of evil. If the powers of evil recognize him it is because he has first, in his own body and flesh, been acquainted with them. The victory of Christ is not achieved through a thunderbolt from heaven. It is achieved through a manger, and mockery; through temptation and tribulation; through a crown of thorns and a cross of pain.

Therefore, to share in the power of Christ we too must be acquainted with the powers of evil. We dare not, like the exorcists in our text, walk into the place where evil reigns, and say "In the name of Jesus, whom the church preaches, begone." If we do, we shall be in a sorry state. We dare not remain in our comfortable life-style, with more food, warmth, and shelter than we can humanly need, and try to tackle the problems of world hunger.

Furthermore, this acquaintance is voluntary. This seems like a terrible choice to have to make. But there really is no choice. For acquainted with the powers of evil we shall be. The question is not whether or not evil will assail us, but whether or not we will be able to see in that evil the means whereby we can share in the power of Christ. The question is whether evil will befall

upon us unaware and overpower us, or we will rather invade the very dwellings of evil, taking pain upon ourselves, in the confidence that these powers which now cause us such tribulations have been overcome in Christ.

And here again worship is to aid us. For the foundation of worship is, not to make life easy for us, but to enable us to lead a difficult life. The function of worship is not simply to inspire us for one more week of routine living. It is rather to enable us to live that we do indeed become acquainted for me with the evil in this world—acquainted in our very flesh—and yet know, in the midst of our strife, that we are the body of the one whose is the victory and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

