

No Middle Ground
Matthew 12:22-37

I grew up in a house with seven pecan trees in the yard. They had all been planted years earlier as a commercial grove, so they were all the same age and about the same size. And like all pecan trees, they dropped their catkins of pollen in the spring and all those messy, gutter-clogging leaves in the fall – and because they all shed branches whenever they felt like it, we weren't allowed to climb any of them.

But they were not all the same where it came to the nuts they produced. A couple of the trees bore longer, thinner nuts. The others bore Stuarts: shorter, fatter nuts. Some of the trees produced lots of nuts, while others produced just a few – some we didn't even bother to look under.

Of course, as the years went by, and as we were unable to treat them for scab or aphids, all of them produced fewer and fewer nuts. The ones they did make may have looked good on the outside, but when you cracked them open, the meat was black and bitter. But from year to year, the trees looked pretty much the same.

In the same way, you can't always judge someone's spiritual health by the way they look, or even by what they do. For let's face it – don't we all know how to put on a good face and pretend that everything's fine? And haven't we all sometimes done the right thing for the wrong reason, or with motives that were mixed at best? But when someone is honest enough to speak to you from his heart, well, that's when you can really tell what's going on inside. That's when you really get to know someone.

Okay, so what did the Pharisees' words reveal about their spiritual condition? Nothing good, for when they witnessed Jesus' obviously divine power, a power that He used time and time again to bless and heal the poor and sick, they somehow came to the crazy conclusion that He did all these things because He was wicked. In fact, verse 24 says that just because Jesus didn't agree with all the details of their own interpretation of the Law of Moses, the Pharisees had convinced themselves that He was using the power of Satan to cast out Satan's demons.

Now, what kind of sense did that make? After all, if Jesus' power had in fact come from Satan, He certainly wouldn't have used it to attack Satan's allies. As He explains in verse 25, no kingdom can possibly survive that sort of infighting, as we increasingly polarized Americans are coming to realize only too clearly.

No, as Jesus reminds us in verse 29, even common criminals know that the only way to rob a strong man's house is to tie him up first to keep him from stopping you. Every soldier knows that the only way for an army to win a war is to join together and fight against the enemy, not one another. So, it should have been obvious to those Pharisees that when Jesus was casting out demons, He was lining up on God's side, not standing with Satan. So, why couldn't they see that?

Well, their problem wasn't that they suffered from what's described these days as a "special kind of stupid." No, just like the man from whom Jesus removed the demon in verse 22, the problem was that they were blind – blind to the love and the truth of God. In fact, their vision of Jesus was so distorted that they could look at the power of the Holy Spirit in Him and see only Satan.

Of course, that sort of blindness wasn't unique to their generation. In the days of Moses, the Pharaoh of Egypt saw plague after plague afflict his country – and yet he couldn't see that the only reasonable response was to submit to God's will and let God's people go. The people of Israel saw how God allowed them to walk through the Red Sea on dry land, while drowning Pharaoh's army as it tried to pursue them. And yet they remained blind to God's love, accusing Him just a few days later of trying to

kill them with thirst in the desert. And of course, only a few generations ago, our Christian ancestors couldn't see how keeping other Christians in slavery was completely inconsistent with Jesus' command that His followers love one another.

And the same sort of blindness continues to the present day. Indeed, as modern American culture drifts further and further away from its Christian roots, the perception of good things as being evil is becoming more and more commonplace. This is why when Samaritan's Purse set up a field hospital in New York City's Central Park to treat COVID patients, the Speaker of the City Council saw it as evil, remarking that its CEO Franklin Graham was "notoriously bigoted and hate-spewing." When Mississippi recently passed a law to protect girls from having to compete athletically with biological boys, the Southern Poverty Law Center saw it as evil, saying it is "reckless and hurtful" to students' "authentic selves."

And however nonsensical such blindness may seem to us, it is a most serious spiritual problem indeed. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that those who see the holy as demonic, those who attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan will not be forgiven. It therefore seems that there is a certain level of spiritual blindness that cannot be healed. It seems that someone can reject the truth of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit so firmly that repentance is no longer an option. We may not understand exactly where the spiritual point of no return lies, but such a fearful prospect is nothing to dismiss easily or take lightly.

But this kind of hardness, Jesus says, cannot be diagnosed through one's outward appearance, and not necessarily through one's actions. No, it's when someone speaks from the heart, expressing a firm conviction that the truth of God is actually a lie from Satan, a firm belief that the love of God is actually the hate of Satan, a firm conclusion that the power of God actually springs from the depths of hell – that's when you know someone has passed the point of no return. It's when the pecan tree produces nuts that are black and bitter on the inside, or when it just doesn't produce any nuts at all – that's when you know it's time to cut it down.

Just so, Jesus reminds us that everyone will eventually stand before God, the great fruit inspector, on the day of judgment. On that day, all the secrets of our hearts will be revealed as all our words, even those whispered in secret, will ring through God's courtroom. And on that day, those who have spurned the cleansing, renewing power of the Holy Spirit, those who have rejected the authority of the Son of God, those who have refused to come to the Father, well, Jesus says they will be condemned. Of course, when you think about it, that means they will get exactly what they want – they will get to be apart from God forever. But because that also means being cut off from the only source of light and life, they will dwell in what Jesus calls the outer darkness, a place of weeping and anguish.

Now, many modern people would reject the very possibility of such divine judgment out of hand. Those who insist that they have the right to determine their own truth for themselves, those who say they even have the right to determine their own reality for themselves, well, they have no use for Jesus and His talk of Judgment Day. In fact, they would say that anyone, even Jesus, who would claim to sit in judgment on anyone else is, in fact evil.

And the ancient Pharisees dismissed the claims of Christ just as vehemently, albeit for different reasons. Oh, they claimed to believe in God's Law, and they were all too ready to pass judgment on Jesus because He did not agree with the way they understood it. That's why they came to the conclusion that His undeniable supernatural power must be demonic, because, for example, He healed people of their sicknesses on the Sabbath.

So, for very different reasons, both the ancient Pharisees and the modern libertines have come to the same point: because Jesus disagrees with them, because Jesus dares to pass judgment on them, He has to go. But in taking such a stand, all those who are opposed to Jesus are bringing judgment on themselves, not least because they are actually in league with Satan. And that's because, as Jesus makes clear in verse 20, if we are not on Jesus' side, we are, in fact, standing against Him.

And that means that judgment day wasn't just a problem for the stuck-up, self-righteous Pharisees, and it isn't just something that all those whacky modern people who reject the very notion of absolute truth have to worry about. No, judgment day is coming for everyone, even for those of us who might imagine that we can have our faith, but not take it too far, those who think that as long as we make an outward profession of faith in Christ, we can go on living for ourselves, for our own pleasures and our own concerns.

For, however extreme it may sound, the fact is that we are all in the midst of a war, all engaged in the spiritual battle between Heaven and Hell. And there are only two teams on the field, only two sides in the conflict raging all around us. We are either subjects of King Jesus or we are rebels against His righteous rule. We are either on Team Jesus or Team Satan. So, however much we might like to sit out this spiritual conflict, there's no room for anyone in the stands. There's no middle ground. We are either on one side or the other, either helping Jesus to gather His people or trying with Satan to scatter them. And just as with any war, that means the only thing that matters is whose side is winning.

But doesn't it seem like Satan has the upper hand these days? With racial hatred marching in our streets, with mass murders plastered across our headlines, with families in tatters and the very concept of human sexuality in question, with ignorance spreading in our classrooms and throughout our electronic media, with pestilence stretching all around the globe, it seems like the forces of death and darkness not only have the upper hand but have won. It seems like the forces of light and truth and love have no chance of success.

But what happened at the beginning of this passage, when Jesus encountered a man that was completely under the power of Satan, a man who wasn't even able to utter a word in his own defense, a man who was literally blind to the Person and Work of Christ? Instead of dismissing him as a lost cause, Jesus healed him, immediately and completely releasing him from the power of darkness. And what happened on Good Friday, when it seemed that the Pharisees and their unbelieving allies had won a resounding victory? What happened when Jesus was beaten until He was bloody and then nailed to the cross until He suffocated and then placed in a tomb? On the third day, He rose from the dead, defeating not only the power of death, but the power of sin and Satan as well.

And no matter how great Satan's legions of ignorance and hatred and fear may seem today, none of them are any match for the self-sacrificial, unconditional, faithful love that Christ demonstrated on the Cross, the same kind of love that He calls His followers to show even to those who consider themselves to be our enemies. For no matter how terrible Satan's forces of darkness and despair may seem today, none of them are any match for the light and truth and resurrection power of Christ.

Yes, that's the only question that matters for us – are we standing with Christ, or are we fighting against Him? Are we gathering the nations to Him? Or are we, by our words and deeds, driving them further away?