

Good morning, its good to see you! We're continuing our series in the book of Matthew, next week I want to talk about the vision for our church for the next 3 years, but today we are in Matthew chapter 12 encountering a pretty strange passage!

At first glance its pretty hard to see how it fits in with our world view

In fact at second glance its still pretty hard!

What Jesus is talking about here is 'the power to change'.

Where do we get the power to change our lives

We all have stuff we're dealing with...

Matthew (whom you don't know and whose name I have changed) struggles with pornography... The web makes access to hard-core pornography trivially easy. 20% of all web-sites are pornographic, a 1/4 of all search requests are for pornography, The average boy in Lewes first watches others have sex on a screen aged 10; According to UK Psychology Magazine 81% of 14-16 year olds regularly look at pornography online at home each week. I would doubt if there were less than 30 people in this room who don't struggle with this issue.

Mark (whom you don't know and whose name I have changed) struggles with alcohol...., Louise beats herself up because she shouts at her kids, Joy is bulimic, Jane has no self-confidence

In fact in ministry, there is little, a Rector doesn't.

He sees people, just like himself, struggling, wanting to change.

Where do we get the power to do that?

Where do we get the power to exorcise our demons?

(You know for a long time I used to think that phrase was "exercise our Demons" I couldn't for the life of me work out why demons needed exercise, are they really that unfit!?)

Jesus teaches us 3 things this morning about our struggles,

- that there are many ways to change;
- that if we use any other way without Him we'll end up worse off than before;
- for Jesus is the only one who can bind the influence of evil in our life forever.

there are many ways to change, if we use any other way without Jesus we'll end up worse than before, He is the only way to change for good, forever.

But before we begin I want to talk about this whole "demon thing".

Jesus believes and teaches that there are such things as personal, evil, spiritual beings.

Today our natural bias is to think that demons are simply naïve, pre-scientific and medieval ways of thinking – an ancient way of explaining psychological problems.

Many people will say that the whole 'demon' thing was just a "*a crude and simplistic metaphor to explain mental illnesses And to think of mental illness in such a way today is both naïve and harmful.*

Well, I want to say right from the start, that I completely agree with that...

That in medieval times they did use "demons" as a superstitious way of explaining mental illness; and if we did that today it would be absolutely crass and harmful.

But the Bible NEVER uses Demon Possession / Spiritual Oppression as a short-hand for a mental illness.

It insists they are different things.

Jesus clearly differentiates between a person's physical, mental state and spiritual state.

They are different.

They are connected, they impact each other: physical symptoms can have emotional causes and vice-versa.

But there is a clearly a difference between physical, mental and spiritual evil.

In fact Jesus' view of the human condition is incredibly nuanced: "evil is multi-dimensional".

It has a physical form, a mental form AND a spiritual form and they inter-relate.

They impact each other.

We compartmentalise ourselves at our peril.

A biologist may look at someone and say there are elements of chemistry in their anguish

A moralist may say "there is something in their past, done to them, that fills them with guilt"

A psychologist may say there are destructive thought patterns here

A behavioural scientist may say there are negative patterns of behaviour here; and

Jesus would say that there are always spiritual elements to evil.

We are multi-dimensional beings.

And just as we learn through Scripture that God is: A personal, spiritual and compassionate being.

So Jesus tells us there are also personal, spiritual and evil beings – and they impact us too.

To believe otherwise is to be Biblically naïve.

So, Jesus says, given the multi-dimensional nature of evil it follows that

1. Firstly, there are many ways to change.

You see in Matthew chapter 12v22, the fundamental argument that is going on is:

whose power are you using to change these people?

v22 Then they brought to Jesus a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute

(do you see here a spiritual cause has a physical symptom – not a mental symptom – a physical symptom) ,
and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.

All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demon's, that this fellow drives out demons."

The question is, what power are you using to change these people?

because the reality is, there are many ways of helping people with their problems:

a listening ear, an operation, medication, practical support, group therapy, exercise...

There are loads of ways of helping people.

And the Pharisees were saying, "Jesus, just because you are helping someone doesn't make you good".

And they are absolutely right – it doesn't!

Any religion. any philosophy, any cult can produce people who will say that their life has been changed.

Religions and Philosophies, that completely contradict each other will claim they help people.

Even things that I feel are stark raving bonkers, like Feng Shui, where Qi (Chee) rides the wind but is restrained by water, can help people.

Just because it works for you – doesn't make it right.

There are plenty of oppressive cults that people would say give them a sense of belonging.

Professor Dawkins would say that just because Christianity helps people doesn't stop it being a malignant and dangerous virus of the mind.

And he's right!

Christianity is NOT true because it works (that's no basis for truth)

Christianity works because it's true.

So we need to be careful ...

There are many ways of sorting people's problems out –

You don't need to be a Christian to overcome Alcoholism, or rebuild your marriage, or manage your finances or beat your phobias.

there are many places, many powers, many ways people can get help -
and just because they work doesn't make them true or right or good.

If Christianity was just about being good, and living well and overcoming our problems in life then it would be no different to so many other things.

But Christianity is SO MUCH MORE than that...

2. That's why Jesus says, (secondly) if you use any other way without me to overcome your demons, you'll end up worse than before!

This is a controversial statement, but in v43, Jesus says

"When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.'

When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.

Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there.

And the final condition of that man is worse than the first

Look its very possible to cast out our demons, to get self-control, to put our life back in order – without the work of the Spirit, without Jesus, without God - but if we do we'll end up worse than before.

Jesus is saying is that Nature abhors a vacuum

(This is another thing I've never really understood – what has Nature got against Vacuums?

What about food processors and washing machines!)

Nature abhors a vacuum so if there is an emptiness in our life we will try to fill it –

If there is something unhelpful in our lives – we will seek to displace it with something more powerful, more attractive, more satisfying.

And there are many ways of doing this.

We don't get the power to change out of nothing.

We get the power to change when we get motivated to change, when an idea, a target, a desire takes its place

When we get a new passion, when we give ourselves over to something new – that's how we change.

And Jesus says “unless that something else includes me, you'll find yourself in a worse place than before”.

Look imagine you're a dad and your little boy is crying (he's hurt, he's upset, he's out of sorts) and imagine you kneel down to him and say “OK Son – now I need you to be a man – because real men don't cry”.

Can the boy use that piece of advice, that idea, to get self-control?

Yes of course he can, he can use the power of that thought to get control....

But now what has he put in its place?

It is a desire NOT to look weak “real men don't cry”

This is the idea, that he has taken into himself, this is what he has bound into his personality “real men don’t cry”. Can it work, can it stop him crying? Yes!

But now will the fear of looking weak make him 7 times worse?

Will the fear of looking weak make his relationships difficult?

Yes!

You can’t have honest relationships, deep relationships, if you can’t admit you are weak – if you never allow yourself to cry.

He has displaced one value with another more precious to him and it has made him worse.

Or imagine you’re sporty and you do OK.

Now imagine your trainer saying to you again and again and again “second place is first loser”, “you’re nothing unless you win!”.

Can we use these words to motivate ourselves - yes we can – “I’m not going to be a loser”.

But now, having bound that into ourselves, having let that value take up residence –

do we think our self-image is NOT NOW tied to winning? –

and will that NOT make us do them 7 times worse?

Or imagine someone who think “looking good” is a way to be noticed and accepted.

Can they use ‘make-up’ and fashion to help them ‘face the world’.

Yes they can – it’ll work!

But now, will they not value themselves (and others!) by what they look like?

Or imagine someone who is anxious and turns to alcohol to help them.

Or imagine someone who is bored and they turn to pornography for entertainment.

Or imagine someone who is feeling unloved and they turn to casual sex for the embrace they need

Will these things work, Yes

But will it not also make them 7 times more a prisoner?

Jesus is saying, if we give ourselves over to something to give us the power to change – and it is not him it’ll make us 7 times worse.

You say “well hold on” not everything does that!

What about good things like friends and family and career and home, what about them?

OK let me ask you a question.

Imagine, you’re in a mess, you’re feeling life is not fulfilling, you’re feeling without purpose...

WHAT IF you put your house in order so that you don’t feel you need God any more.

Is that good?

what if, we put stuff in our lives, that means we never seek God?

what if we put our lives in order so that we don’t now feel any need of God

Are we not eternally, infinitely, worse off?

Not just 7 times worse off, or 70 x 7 worse off, but eternally, infinitely, worse off!

This is what I mean, Monday is my day off.

We tidy the house, we take the rubbish to the dump, I do some D-I-Y, I repair the D-I-Y that I did the before that didn’t work! Monday is my day-off.

However, if I can get away with it, if no-one is looking –

I can play a computer game for 8 hours solid.

I'll be entertained, I'll be quiet, I'll be challenged, I'll have been totally engrossed, Possessed if you like by it.

But by the end of day – I'll have wasted 8 hours!

if I can be so captivated, so entertained, so engrossed, so possessed over something of SO LITTLE value and have wasted my time...

how MUCH MORE can we be captivated, entertained, challenged, engrossed, possessed over things of SOME VALUE – BUT NOT ULTIMATE value – and have wasted our whole life!

We can fill our lives with so many things –

we fill our lives with things that will make us 7 times worse in this life

we fill our lives with things that will make us eternally infinitely worse.

There are many ways of fixing our life

There are many sources of power

There are many routes to getting our life in order

but if they are not **Jesus** we will end up worse.

Unless we are possessed by him then we will be possessed by something else.

Unless we are captivated by him we will be captivated by something else

Unless our priorities are set around him, they will be set around something else.

Firstly, there are lots of things that will solve our problems – but just because they work doesn't make them true or right or even good

Secondly, anything we turn to for power for self-control, for improvement beside Jesus will always make us worse off

3. Thirdly, Jesus said I am the one only who can bind the desires within you.

v28 "I have the power to drive out demons by the Spirit of God – and when I do so – the Kingdom of God has come upon you"

v29 "I am the one who can bind and overcome the one who dominates you"

In short, I am the one, the only one, who can change you forever.

No matter what strongholds we have in our life,

no matter what grip our habits have over us,

no matter how ingrained the patterns are

Jesus is the one who can displace them, and bring in the Kingdom of God

3.1 You see the problem with most people is that they are captivated by the "wrapping paper" and "miss the gift".

The wrapping paper of our soul: is this life, these few short years, our friendships, our work, our hobbies, our entertainment – all of these are great but they are wrapping paper of our soul

The gift is eternity life, becoming God's child, finding our place in the universe, having an eternal purpose.

The problem with many people is that they are so engrossed in the wrapping paper that they miss the gift.

C.S. Lewis said, we are half-hearted creatures, messing around with sex and ambition and entertainment when infinite joy is offered to us, like a child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because they cannot imagine what is meant by a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

God wants us to be happy. He is passionate about our happiness but he knows that it is only found in Him.

When we let him take possession of our lives
When we let him shape our values
When we let him become our identity, our first love, our number one passion, our priority
that is when we find life, eternal purpose, absolute fulfilment
That is when the Kingdom of God comes upon us.

My friends, God wants to fill your life with his presence and his blessings, do not be so focussed on the wrapping paper of this life that you miss the gift of his Kingdom.
Put God first, put Jesus at the centre, let him drive your ambitions, set your priorities, make God GOD and let him deal with your demons.

You ask how?

Well, if many people are so engrossed in the wrapping paper that they miss the gift

3.2 Then most Christians are so focussed on the gift that we miss the giver.

You see the reason why we live such ordinary lives

The reason why we have anxiety in life's storms

The reason why we seem so powerless to overcome our demons

is because, even though we are Christians, we STILL have a "what's in it for me" attitude

God wants us to be happy. He is passionate about our happiness but he knows that it is only found in Him.

Not in the security that he gives – but in Him.

Not in the purpose that he provides – but in Him.

Not even in his blessings – but in Him.

The key to our happiness is not found in our circumstances
even if those circumstances are eternal life
even if those circumstances are making a difference
even if those circumstance are the blessings of God
They key to our happiness is found in Jesus.

What I am saying is that happiness is not found in the gifts of God – it is found IN God.

We pursue the gifts, the blessings, the benefits and ignore the giver.

Fundamentally we have a "what's in it for me, Christianity".

And it is powerless.

We will never truly give our life to God – if we have a what's in it for me attitude

We will never sacrifice our time or tithe our income – if we have a "what's in it for me attitude".

It is only

When we delight in God,

When our passion is God's glory

When the joy of the Lord is our strength
that the true power of the Kingdom will come in our life.

Matthew Henry, a puritan Pastor said “Joy in the Lord will arm us against the assaults of all our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of the taste for those pleasures with which the enemy baits his hook”.

Let me read that to you again
Joy in the Lord will arm us against the assaults of all our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of the taste for those pleasures with which the enemy baits his hook”.
I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term that to gain a distaste for sin, by gaining a superior satisfaction in God.

Oh my friends,
Whatever you have in your life that is “central” and not Jesus
it will not enable you to sing in the storm
it will not give you power in the darkness
it will NOT comfort you in death
it will not bring you to life
it will not make you happy
Only Jesus can do this
Only Jesus provides the power to sing in the storm, to face the darkness, to love you to life, to make you happy.

My friends,
You struggle with demons,
You Christianity is half-hearted
You don't really get it

Don't focus on the gifts, focus on the giver.
delight in God,
make His glory your passion
make His joy your strength
And God will build his Kingdom in your life
And your light will shine like stars in the universe
And your demons of habits and fears will flee and you will have Peace.