

Lord Jesus, we give thanks that You bruised the head of the old serpent and delivered us from his power. And because You have purchased us with Your holy blood, keep us Your own, and suffer not the enemy to seduce our hearts. Let Your angels war against those who seek our soul, and drive them far from us. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 35, p. 88)

Now [Jesus] was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons," while others, to test Him, kept seeking from Him a sign from heaven. But He, knowing their thoughts, said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul. And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil. Whoever is not with Me is against Me, and whoever does not gather with Me scatters. "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first." As He said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed!" But He said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

In Christ Jesus, who by His Spirit has swept our houses clean, but has not left them empty, by His Word He fills us completely, dear fellow redeemed:

Selfishness and self-centeredness gives the illusion that a person is liberated, set free, unfettered by any restrictions. When you live a life in which you act as though the world revolves around you, it can seem so fulfilling. But those around you are baffled. Their needs, desires, interests, life experiences escape a self-focused person with such unrealistic perspectives. However, it frankly can be so very lonely in the end.

Spiritually there is yet a more sinister and devastating result for such self-focus. Much of American Christianity would have us turn in toward ourselves. They ask such questions as these: *Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Have you given your life totally over to Jesus? Have you invited Jesus into your heart and received Him rightly? Is your life cleaned up enough so that it is worthy of His presence?* "American Christianity most often preaches the

Christian instead of the Christ.”¹ We shall consider based on our text how dangerous this fake man-made religion supposedly in the name of Jesus is because: **Satan Binds When Focus Is on Self and Not on Christ.**

I

The woman who approaches Jesus at the end of our text was seeking this personal experiential relationship with Jesus. She speaks up, marveling at Jesus’ teachings and says: "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed!" – she liked the idea of being His mother. Now none of us would deny that Mary had a special and unique relationship with Jesus as His mother. In truth, we consider her blessed and highly favored, holding her in high regard. We call her the mother of God. But that relationship had nothing to do with her being right with God in Christ Jesus. She, like each and every one of us needed to have Christ come to her with His grace of forgiveness, life and salvation. As Mary does in her *Magnificat*.

But our sinful natures are just like that woman’s who said these things, focusing on self and imagining that we have what it takes to build a special relationship with God. It naturally comes to us and fills us with all sorts of good thoughts about ourselves finding that we are deserving and worthy. Daily repentance, confessing to our undeserving and unworthiness seems too negative and self-destructive to the world and again to our sinful natures. Satan would agree. With his lies he seeks to convince us that we have much to offer God for which we should be richly rewarded.

How does Jesus address this woman’s self-focus? He says: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" The Word of God is the power that gives. Only one person could be the mother of Jesus. While having some earthly blessings to be sure, this did not give Mary what she needed spiritually. Rather, remember that expression used with Mary in regard to Jesus’ nativity – *"she pondered all these things in her heart"*? What things? - the Word of God spoken by angels, by shepherds, which promised life and salvation in this holy One born for the whole world of sinners.

Mary was not focusing on self when she pondered these things in her heart, but rather on this holy One who miraculously had been conceived in her womb, who was born in a stable, who came to save her and all people. The focus was on Christ, not on who she was and how she received Him.

Consider how our text begins. Jesus healed a man demon possessed. This demon left him unable to speak. But when Jesus drives out the demon, the man could speak. This frustrated Jesus’ enemies who then said: "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons". That makes as much sense as do the enemies of a populist politician saying the reason he or she is so popular among the people is that he or she hates the people! Someone’s

¹ Has American Christianity Failed?, by Bryan Wolfmueeller, CPH 2016, p. 8

enemies in this life often demonize that person, creating an unrealistic and increasingly menacing monster in their own minds. Jesus challenged this ridiculous charge that He was driving out demons with the power and will of the devil himself with simple common sense. *A divided household falls!*

II

Through these bogus charges Jesus could identify how the wicked hearts of sinners work and leave them vulnerable to the tricks of Satan, who desires to torment all people in the fires of hell everlastingly. So Jesus confronted their absurd charges and addresses the real problem all sinners have in the face of their actual enemies.

Jesus uses a commonly understood occurrence: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil." A strong, but sinful person thinks he can keep himself safe spiritually, because he has an elaborate self-focused system feeling safe and quite self-assured. But then the devil who is mightier than all sinners strips him of all his armor and is as damned as he.

Jesus clarifies this even further by this image: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of that person is worse than the first." You and I were born sinners, subjects to Satan and his kingdom. We were bound to our sin, death and hell. We had no way to free ourselves, no matter how imaginative we could become.

Sweeping our houses clean with all the 12-10-7 step programs, new years' resolutions, surrendering ourselves to a higher power even if its name is "Jesus", but are still self-focused, we remain impotent. We do not have the power to keep ourselves clean. Only one can clean us and keep us clean – the Spirit of God through the appointed means works this for us all, otherwise it is fake and leaves us vulnerable to the ongoing tricks of Satan. This is the finger of God at work overpowering the kingdom of Satan.

Focusing on yourselves my fellow sinners binds you tightly to the false religion of Satan begun with those familiar words: *"Did God really say ...?"* Focus on Christ alone. But where is He to be found? In the very places He has ordained for you – in the gracious waters of your baptism, in the Word declaring you forgiven and righteous before God for Jesus' sake alone and in the holy meal of Jesus' true body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins. As Jesus corrected that well-meaning woman and her sentiments in regard to being Jesus' mother - *"Blessed rather are*

those who hear the word of God and keep it!" so we need to be constantly instructed to remain Christ focused.

Your Lord Jesus is at the ready every day to provide you with the maid service of sweeping your houses clean by leading you in repentance and faith. Instead of being bound by Satan, you are set free, loosed from the bondage to sin, death and hell. This battle between Satan and Christ's Kingdoms is very real and intense. It does not end for you until you die or Jesus returns. But you are not this strong man who figures out how to defend yourself. No, you are like the rest of us, you can only be washed and fed, and eventually put to bed to be awakened on the great *gettin'-up* morning. Meanwhile, you are strengthened for the battle that rages on and remain standing righteous before God everlastingly for Jesus' sake alone. Amen.