

The Strongest Man

Matthew 12:22-37

"I was framed," she said, "I was set up" she protested, "I'm the victim here" - but the Indonesian judge didn't believe her and so on the 27th May 2005 she was sent to prison. I'm talking about Australian woman Shapelle Corby, who today on the 27th May celebrates the 1 year anniversary of her return to Australia precisely 13 years after that fateful sentence in 2005. Was she framed or not? Who knows - but her words ever since have framed what we think of her.

For like the fruit of a tree tells us what tree it is, so the words of our mouths reveal things about us. Our words frame us in a certain way and on the basis of our words, other people make judgments about us. My wife Karen and I are often framed negatively at parties. People we meet ask us "So Karen, what do you do" - and when she says I'm a math's teacher they nearly always say - "Oh no. I hated maths, I was so hopeless at maths and I hated my teacher too." Then thoroughly embarrassed and hoping for a way out, they hastily turn to me - what about you? "I'm an Anglican minister." And with that their minds are made up and they beat a hasty retreat for the food table. Like it or not we've just been framed by our words.

And this process of framing people by their words is precisely what we see in today's passage. Words are said which lead to all kinds of judgements being made. And of greatest concern to you and me, we see here that our words about Jesus reveal our hearts, declare our identity and frame our destiny as being for him or against him. Let's check it out together

Framing Jesus (12:22-24)

Our passage kicks off here in verses 22-24 where we can see people asking questions about Jesus' identity based on what he's saying and doing as he heals this demon possessed man - "Could this be the Son of David?" they said. But that question seems kind of odd doesn't it. When we see someone get healed we usually don't say of the doctor - could this be God's chosen King? We just think - what a great doctor. And in Jesus' day there were doctors. They also had Pharisees called exorcists who went round casting out demons from people. So there really was nothing new in what Jesus was doing here. Rather it's the method by which Jesus does these things that catches the people's attention. For when Jesus speaks it happens and it happens immediately. It's just as Steve shared last week; Jesus' words have amazing authority. His words have absolute power and yet he expresses this power in the kind and gentle care of the oppressed. That's why the people begin to wonder could he be the Son of David, could he be God's chosen servant, in whom God's Spirit dwells, in whom the nations will put their hope?

But they're not the only ones listening in and in verse 24 we read that when the Pharisees heard this they thoroughly disagreed with the people's framing of Jesus. Sure they can see Jesus does what he does with great power and authority BUT in doing so he's taking from their influence over the people. Back in verse 14 we saw two weeks ago these Pharisees are so jack of Jesus butting in on their turf doing good things for people, that they actually began plotting how to kill him. Well now they launch their campaign by using Jesus' words and power to frame him in a bad light. In their expert opinion they pronounce that anyone who can say what Jesus says and act like Jesus acts, must themselves be 'possessed by Beelzebub'. Their logic being - only someone who possesses the power of the Prince of Demons could have authority over demons like Jesus does. As far as they're concerned this

Jesus character is bad news, he's thoroughly evil and in league with the Devil of Hell.

Jesus Frames Himself (12:25-29)

So having been framed this way by the Pharisees, how does Jesus respond? Hearing their words and knowing their thoughts, Jesus speaks up now to correct this identity issue and frames himself. And it's not himself he's concerned for here. Rather he's deeply concerned for the reputation of the Holy Spirit and the consequences for any human who speaks against him. So with a bit of simple logic and a parable of great clarity Jesus explains who he is, who he's not and by what power he does what he does. He begins by showing up the flawed logic of the Pharisees. Verse 25 *"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. 26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.*

It's obvious isn't it? Divided we fall. Every empire and every kingdom in human history, has met its end when it opposed itself from the inside. Likewise a church – churches don't fail because of external persecution, a church goes down when its members oppose one another on the inside. Likewise every family divided against itself cannot stand. A marriage crumbles if the members that make it up betray and oppose each other. So too at the personal level - everyone knows that to oppose yourself is a clear marker of mental illness. Left untreated self-opposition can eventually lead to the tragedy of self-destruction. And we know these things don't we?! At every level of human experience any nation, organization, church, family or person that opposes itself on the inside is doomed to fail. And so it is with Satan. For Jesus to use the power of demons to drive out demons is a ridiculous notion that even the friends of the Pharisees would judge them for.

So what's really going on here then? Well Jesus explains it in vs 28-9. You see he doesn't bring the Kingdom of Satan to defeat the kingdom of Satan. No, he brings the Kingdom of God to over-power Satan. That's what his little Parable of the Strong man is all about. In this story the Strong man is Satan, the strong man's house is this world, the strong man's possessions are you and me and the thief is Jesus. Jesus, the thief, is the stronger man, Jesus is the Strongest man – who overcomes Satan and defeats him.

Now while this is a logical, rational answer, it's one that goes against the grain of how our society likes to think of itself. If Jesus is right then that means we humans aren't in charge of this world – Satan is! If Jesus is right then all people are Satan's possessions, owned by him, enslaved to him, doing his secret bidding when we hate and hurt and bring shame and pain to one another. However as a society intoxicated with notions of autonomy and authenticity, we think Satan has no power over anyone - if he exists at all. But if Jesus is right then our world is in trouble and we need someone to rescue us from Satan. And that's precisely what Jesus came full of the Holy Spirit and power to do. Jesus came into our world to oppose Satan and to unseat him from power, to knock Satan off his seat as Lord of this world and replace him as the Lord of the heavens and the earth. The various run-ins Jesus has with demon possessed people are evidence of that battle. Yet every time, Jesus is so much more powerful than Satan. Satan and his demons do not stand a chance, Jesus defeats them merely by speaking, such is his power by the Holy Spirit.

Friends THIS IS WHAT JESUS IS ALL ABOUT – forget the talk about Jesus being a great teacher or a lovely man or an inspiration. While Jesus is gentle towards his people he's not gentle against our slave master. Jesus is the Strongest man who came into the world to save us from Satan's dominion and he does this by overpowering Satan. He does it immediately in some people's lives like this guy in our passage and ultimately for all who follow him by his death on the cross and rising again. Jesus brings the Kingdom of God and as the strongest man who rose from the dead, Jesus is the Son of David to whom God has given all power and authority. From now on it's Jesus who decides what's important and what's not. It's Jesus who determines who's innocent and who's guilty and by what measure. And this is immediately what we see in verses 30-37 as Jesus frames the Pharisees with their words.

Jesus Framing the Pharisees (12:30-37)

Matthew 12:30 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. The Pharisees are clearly not people who want to gather with Jesus. They're not with him they're against him. Like for every other person in the world today who refuses to gather with Jesus, the only other alternative is to be against him. And the measure Jesus uses to determine who's for or against him is what he hears coming out of our mouths. The words we say about Jesus show what we believe about Jesus. Our words reveal our hearts, our words declare our identity, and when it comes to Jesus our words about him frame our destiny. So for the Pharisees in this passage, they're in grave danger because of what they said about Jesus – hold on, that's not what he said did he! They're in danger because of what they said about the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit who empowers Jesus.

You see every kind of sin and slander we say about Jesus can be forgiven by Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross pays the price for those sins. And that's good news isn't it – forgiveness through Jesus is available to us for all these things. But as judge of the world there is one sin Jesus will not stand for - anyone claiming the Holy Spirit is evil. All the sins and blasphemies of people will be forgiven them but not the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Call the Holy Spirit evil when he is not. Teach people that the Spirit who empowered Jesus' miracles is evil and not good, that is the eternal sin for which there is no forgiveness. And that's what these Pharisees have just done. By their words these Pharisees show themselves to be the brood of vipers they claimed Jesus was.

For as the overflow of our hearts, our words identify us just like the fruit of a tree identifies the tree. And in the same way the quality of the fruit of a tree declares how good or bad the tree is, so our words about Jesus displays what's in our hearts towards him. Isn't this obvious? You can tell if I love my wife and children based upon how I speak of them. Sure my actions must be in accord with my words, but it still begins with my words, just as a marriage begins with the words we declare at the ceremony. So too in how I speak of Jesus. Listen to my words about him and this will tell you where I stand with him – am I with him or against him? It's a very simple measure, a very accurate measure and it's the measure Jesus uses to know our hearts and frame our future, verse 36 ... *I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."*

Our Words Framing Us

So then, how do your words frame you? As Jesus listens to the words from your mouth, what judgements is he making about your heart? What judgements is he making about your identity ... about your destiny? What do you say about Jesus? What do you say about the Holy Spirit? Do you say that Jesus and his Spiritual power is good for our world? What do your words about God reveal about your heart? About your identity? About your destiny?

That's challenging isn't it! Makes me want to zip my lips and never speak again – but we all know that'll never happen! So maybe rather than trying to go all silent, maybe we need to learn how to speak in ways that are true and honouring of him! To speak of Jesus' power in ways that honour the Holy Spirit. How can we do that? Well maybe we could organise ourselves to meet weekly somewhere – like in a school hall and maybe we could set aside our resources for someone to teach us how to speak about Jesus. Maybe when we meet together we could gather around the words of Jesus and we could sing out the truth about him and we could pray out loud and confess our sins and hear our forgiveness declared and we could teach the next generation how to speak about him also – and maybe we could have a special training program partnering with the church that intentionally trains young people how to do it in their first year of being an adult out of school and andand I think you get the picture. Our words about Jesus frame us so we need to be intentional in keeping from our lips empty words about him.

For who is he? Who is he really? Jesus is the strongest man who has overcome the evil one. He has bound up Satan by the power of the Holy Spirit. He has rescued you and me and gathered us safely with him. These are the truths about Jesus which make our lives work, give us joy and show us who we really are. So together let's speak truthfully of Jesus, and may our words always frame us for salvation in him. AMEN