

## Either/Or

Jesus casts out demons, and immediately the scribes and Pharisees accuse Him of *being in cahoots with the devil*, casting out demons in the name of “Beelzebul,” that is, “The lord/Baal of the flies.” They just can’t accept the fact that the guy they hate could possibly be on God’s side. He’s obviously working for Beelzebul, right? That’s the **only** explanation. Jesus lets them know how utterly foolish their premise is. “*A house divided cannot stand. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?*” The point is clear: Jesus can’t be working **for** the devil if He’s so clearly working **against** the devil.

This is when He goes into the lesson on the strong man. There is a reason that Scripture refers to the devil as “the prince of this world.” He and his demonic minions are far stronger than any of us feeble children of Adam. This is also why St. Paul warns us that we aren’t battling against ordinary flesh and blood, **but against the spiritual rulers and powers of this present darkness**. However... that demonic strong man is no match for the stronger man; the One who breaks in and overcomes him and puts him down. When Almighty God, in the flesh and person of Jesus Christ, breaks in, the Baal of the flies—Beelzebul—is bound up, overcome, and put down by the stronger God of Israel. It’s not even a contest.

And given the times we find ourselves in nowadays, it’s good that we ponder this *Christus Victor* reality. Beelzebul and all his minions, although certainly much stronger and more powerful than any and all of us children of Adam, is no match for the Lord of Life. No matter how bleak and fly-infested and rotten things may seem to be sometimes, the Lord of Life is in charge. The stronger man—God in the flesh—has already entered in and won the war. The lord of the flies/death has been crushed by the Lord of Life. The strong man has already been overcome. He’s been rendered impotent by the omnipotent. “*Where, death, is thy victory? Where, death, is thy sting? Death has been swallowed up in victory!*”

But what about the **rest** of what Jesus had to say? “*Whoever is not with Me is against Me.*” That’s pretty cut-and-dry, black-and-white, isn’t it? Either you’re with Jesus or you’re against Jesus. Said another way, either you’re with Jesus or you’re with the devil. **Those are the only two sides**. And I know everyone here breathes a great big sigh of relief because we’re clearly with Jesus. But maybe that’s why so many Christians don’t bother **wrestling** with these words. Folks: There’s a reason these texts are appointed for this Sunday in Lent; this season of repentance.

You may not believe it; you may not want to admit it, but there are plenty of times when we are against Christ. Just think about something as cut-and-dry as Holy Communion. Jesus very plainly states, “*As often as you do this, remember what I have said. This IS My body. This IS My blood.*” So... if someone says otherwise, doesn't that mean that they are **against** Jesus? Jesus says, “*This IS My body,*” and others say, “*No, it's not.*” **Well... ?** What about Holy Baptism as a forgiveness of sins? What about infant baptism? What about Scripture's prohibition on women pastors? “*Those who aren't with Me are against Me.*” Hmm... that's not good. Well... thank God that these words don't pertain to us, right? WRONG!

While I certainly won't challenge your faith in Christ (just like I'm not challenging/doubting the faith of any Christian who calls Jesus their Lord and Savior; e.g., Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Church of Christ, etc), **I will caution you.** As I said, there is a reason that this particular Gospel lesson has been appointed for centuries upon centuries smack-dab in the middle of this season of repentance we call “Lent.” Who here sins? Correct me if I'm wrong, but doesn't sin put us at enmity with God? Who here sins **purposefully**? Careful before you answer! I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that you are **more than familiar** with the Ten Commandments. You know what God clearly says about things such as adultery and sex outside of marriage, murder, honoring those in authority over us, covetousness, lying, and slander. And yet... we still do these things, **oftentimes quite willingly and unapologetically.** Nobody has ever held a gun to your head and made you think adulterous or murderous thoughts, have they? You know what God so clearly says about not having any other gods and trusting in Him above all things, about not misusing His name, and honoring His Sabbath by keeping it holy. Nobody has ever forced you, against your will and under the threat of death, to hit the snooze button and pull those warm blankets so you can worship the mattress god. Nobody has ever forced you to go to the casino or the kids' soccer game instead of church. **You are NOT a poor, innocent victim!** You have stood against God. “*Those who aren't with Me are against Me.*” It's cut-and-dry, plain-and-simple.

Now here's the thing: The story doesn't end here. Your story doesn't end here with your guilt. Look to this cross. Your heavenly Father gave His only-begotten Son to suffer and die for you. Jesus took on flesh and came down to this rotten, stinking valley of darkness, death and despair in order to take your place. In a very real way Jesus became the enemy of God for you. He came to this earth so that our heavenly Father would pour out all His righteous wrath against Him and not you. God the Father was against Jesus so He never has to be against you. We are saved/delivered from this justly-deserved death sentence purely by God's grace; purely by Christ's perfect obedience and perfect love for His Father and for us. Understood in repentant faith, how do you even begin to say “thank you” for

this undeserved gift of life and forgiveness? How do you show your thanks for such incomprehensible mercy and grace? *“Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it.”*

And that’s just it: We don’t endeavor to hear and keep the Word of God in some kind of foolish attempt to earn God’s grace and forgiveness. First and foremost, such works-righteous foolishness is clearly against God. Such works-righteous foolishness robs Christ of His cross. ***Such works-righteous, cross-robbing foolishness is NEVER blessed by God!*** Secondly, we know that works-righteousness is an impossibility for us fallen and sinful children of Adam. If we were able to keep all the commands and Word of God (or even any of them), then Jesus didn’t have to die. We would just need to try harder. But die He did... for you, for me, for the entire world.

This is what makes repentance so fundamentally different from works-righteousness. Repentance, which is a work of the Holy Spirit in and through the hearing of the Word of God, hears the Truth of the cross; the Truth of sin so great and damning that God had to die for it. Repentant faith ***confesses*** the truth of sin; that is, repentant faith agrees with the Good Physician when it comes to the diagnosis of sin. ***No excuses. No justifications. No “you don’t understand. It’s different in my case.”*** Nope. Repentant faith confesses. Repentance is an “about-face,” a 180-degree turn. You can’t willingly keep walking in the darkness while at the same time walking in the Light. Either you are walking in repentance in Christ or you are not. Either you are walking in repentance in Christ, or you are walking away from Him (or taking a stand against Him). Repentant faith turns and holds fast to the Almighty, calling upon Him to be merciful, not for our sake, but for the sake of Christ alone. Repentant faith, as I said, knows the Truth—the Truth of sin, and more importantly, the Truth of our salvation. Because of our blood-bought, baptismal redemption in Christ Jesus, repentant faith wants nothing more than to walk with God and please God, ***not in order to be saved, but out of the joy that He has already saved us.***

Look to this cross. Look to this font. Remember what the Lord of Life has ***already*** said and done for you in your baptism; how He has ***blessed*** you. Keep this Word. Hold fast to this blessing. Look to this altar. Here is Almighty God Himself, breaking in to our dark shadowy valley of death, not to bring His wrath and strike us down, but to comfort us, to forgive us, to give to us His blood-bought gifts of pardon, assurance, and peace that surpasses all understanding. Keep this Word and Promise. Hold fast to this blessedness, and you will be truly blessed, not because of anything you’re doing, ***but because you are holding fast to the Blessed One.*** Folks: Here is Christ! Here is *Christus Victor*, the Blessed and Almighty One who vanquished the strong forces of sin, death, and the devil. Here is the Lord of Life... for you. Here is the One, who in binding up Beelzebul and the

powers of sin and death, *has loosed you; has set you free*; “free from the hands of your enemies; free to worship Him without fear, holy and righteous in His sight all the days of your life” (ref. Luke 1:68-79). I can think of no better way to end than by simply proclaiming the blessed victory of Christ from His cross: It is finished, in Christ and because of Christ.

Hold fast to and keep this Gospel promise. Hold fast to and keep this Gospel promise, for you are blessed; blessed in Christ and because of Christ.

**AMEN**