

## I. Quotes for Screen

A. We must understand that horrendous evil...is almost always motivated by some vision of good, no matter how distorted. Rose Marie Berger

## II. Set Up

A. Welcome / special welcome for guests. We begin a new series today – one designed to instill confidence for the challenges we face. In Luke 11 and 12 there are a series of events that, taken collectively, make it clear that Jesus is greater than the things that push us down, keep us from sleeping through the night, make us weak in the knees, whatever. In The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy worries about “lions and tigers and bears, Oh My!” We have a different set of concerns. What we are going to see is that God is bigger than all of them. Today we note that God is greater than evil.

B. Let me set the stage for what follows by reading the passage. It is from Luke 11, beginning with verse:

C. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: “Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

D. “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

E. “When an impure spirit comes out of a person, 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 swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first.”

F. As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.”

G. He replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

### III. Campus Pastor Set Up

A. In *The Lord of the Rings* there is a scene that captures today's text – that is, it shows someone being liberated from the stifling, joyless power of evil. *The Lord of the Rings* was written by J.R.R. Tolkien. As you may know, he was one of a half dozen writers who: 1) fought in a war; 2) was injured; and 3) then spent the rest of his life writing indirectly about evil. This group includes C.S. Lewis, Kurt Vonnegut, George Orwell and William Golding. These men – and perhaps others – seemed unable to write about evil directly. But they were compelled to try to warn people about evil, so they did so by writing allegories.

1. Lewis, who was left for dead on the battle fields of World War I, wrote a six part fantasy account of good versus evil known as *The Chronicles of Narnia*.
2. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. who was one of the very few survivors of the Bombing of Dresden, wrote *Slaughter House Five*
3. George Orwell, one of the few people to survive being shot through the neck in the Spanish Civil War,<sup>1</sup> wrote *Animal Farm*.
4. And finally, William Golding, who was involved in the sinking of the *Bismarck*, the D-Day landing on the beaches of Normandy and other battles, wrote *The Lord of the Flies*.

B. They all were overwhelmed with the ugly nature of epic evil and war and wanted people to see it for what it was: joyless, senseless and oppressive.

C. The scene we are going to see in *The Lord of the Rings*, is one in which Theoden – the King of Rohan – is liberated from Sauron by Gandalf – one of the three Christ figures in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>2</sup> He will make a reference to having passed through death and we'll see that he has a much different level of power since doing that. In fact, he is no longer Gandalf the Grey, he is now Gandalf the white. Anyway, as you will see, there is something like an exorcism here. And when it's over – when evil has left Theoden – he is transformed. He is free from the ugly, stifling oppressive power of evil and as it leaves him he changes before our eyes. Let's watch this brief clip.

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<sup>1</sup> William Golding, who writes *The Lord of the Flies* – the account of how savage a group of boys become when left on an island – was physically injured by an explosion early in World War II. Golding was quite traumatized by what he saw. He notes that: 1) the war rubbed one's nose in the human condition; and 2) "I began to see what people were capable of doing. Anyone who moved through those years without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey, must have been blind or wrong in the head."

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien divided the three offices of Christ – prophet, priest and king – into three characters: Gandalf was the prophet; Frodo was the priest and Aragorn was the King.

## IV. Intro

A. I love that scene. It illustrates a very powerful truth: people think of evil as liberating, freeing and exciting. It is not – it is the opposite. Good is freeing and life-giving. Evil makes us small.

B. As you have heard, today we begin a new series – one based on Luke 11 and 12, and one designed to highlight the idea that Jesus is greater than everything that holds us back.

C. This is the fifth series within our study of Luke’s Gospel – his account of the life, teachings, claims and work of Jesus.

1. In earlier messages I’ve noted that this Gospel was written for a man named Theophilus – a Greek official who I believe was a new Christ-follower.

2. We opened with Luke’s account of Christ’s birth and early years.

3. We then moved into Amazed – a look at the number of ways Jesus proved he was more than a rabbi; that led into Revolution, which led into Talking with God. Our new series is called Jesus is Greater Than

D. Today’s text is about evil. The point is: Jesus is greater than evil.

E. This is not the first time evil has come up. In a message a few months back – on Luke 9 – I made a few points. I started by noting that: Many are confused by evil

1. Some deny it altogether.

a) This is true of modern liberals – and please note, I am not using that term in a negative way. I realize that many of you hear it that way. I am simply noting that since the Enlightenment, there is a school of thought that says – among other things: 1) that evil does not exist; 2) that people are inherently good; and 3) that the problem is society. If we could fix the oppressive systems then everyone and everything would flourish.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The liberal view contends that with just a bit more education we’d all realize that “there is no bogey man, nor are there bad people. There are just bad structures and systems and that once we fix society, evil will vanish.” Conservatives generally focus on personal evil but appear blind to the oppressive consequence of evil systems.

- (1) Many academics are in this camp. It is also a well-accepted view among those frequently referred to as “the liberal elite.” This view has a pretty big market share today. It has a foothold in some media outlets. So, for instance, we do not generally hear newscasters talking about evil acts being committed.<sup>4</sup> No matter how heinous or atrocious something is, it is not described as evil. That is a value judgment a liberal would not want to make.
- b) In addition to Liberalism, those who embrace an Eastern worldview also generally deny evil, though in a different way. They view evil as an illusion – it does not exist. Nor, for that matter, does good.
2. So, some deny evil.<sup>5</sup> On the flip side, some are fascinated by it.
- a) They glorify evil. They appear drawn to it like the proverbial moth to a flame. They view it as glamorous, daring, intriguingly rebellious, even sexy. We see some of this fascination today in the number of horror movies that focus on zombies and demons and that particular view of evil. We also see a different fascination with evil in some Christian circles that find Satan under every rock.
- b) I would argue that this understanding of evil is not very developed. It’s pretty naïve. But there are quite a few people in this camp.
3. There is a third view of evil – that which is captured by the term dualism.

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<sup>4</sup> There are a few exceptions to this. Evil got some press after 9-11. And Scott Peck followed up his book *The Road Less Traveled* with one called *People of the Lie*, in which Peck<sup>4</sup> - who was a psychiatrist – said that he had had “encounters with something he could not find in The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. He said he had encountered ‘evil’” And he would reiterate that point in one of his last books, called, *Glimpses of the Devil*. There are moments when someone names the elephant in the room, but not many.

<sup>5</sup> I think this view is subsiding. I think belief in evil is making a comeback. I have some reasons for this: 1) In a *New York Times* article a while back, the author noted that some psychiatrists are starting to think that some of the people they examine are “not just disturbed but evil. Evil in that their deliberate, habitual savagery defies any psychological explanation or attempt at treatment.” (“This, of course, flies in the face of traditional psychiatry, which eschews all talk of evil as a way of avoiding ‘a dangerous slide from clinical to moral judgment that could put people on death row unnecessarily and obscure the understanding of violent criminals.’” [David Neff, “Naming the Horror,” *Christianity Today*, April 5, 2005.]) And 2) a few years ago Lance Morrow, then the editor of *Time*, said that although the term evil is often used brainlessly – which was a dig at George W. Bush who had just used it – “evil is still there – a mystery, a black hole into which reason and sunshine vanish.” He went on to suggest that evil was laying waste to much of the world, spreading like a deadly fungus on top of other things. He also argued that evil is unspectacular – that is, it’s not only unusual people (like Hitler) who do evil things, we all do. “Evil shares our bed and eats at our table.” (Lance Morrow, *The Real Meaning of Evil: It’s Not the Devil with horns and a tail but a deadly fungus*, *Time*, Feb. 24, 2003, p. 74).

a) This view suggests that the universe is a battle ground where two different kingdoms – one good and one bad – are perpetually at war with one another. Each is ruled by some kind of divinity – God and Satan, who are roughly equals.

4. So, one of the points I made in the talk a few months back is that there is a lot of confusion and disagreement about evil.

F. The second point I made was that the Bible has some pretty specific things to say about the topic. (The Bible makes specific points about evil). Not comprehensive things, mind you. We do not get all of our questions answered.<sup>6</sup> But we do get some. If you read the Bible you come away with an understanding that:

1. Evil is real – it’s not an illusion

2. And also that evil is personal. There are supernatural evil agents looking to undermine God’s plan and order.

G. The third point I made in the Luke 9 sermon was that it’s probably best to view Evil is corrupted good.<sup>7</sup>

1. This is the view articulated by Augustine, C.S. Lewis and others. Sometimes it goes by the name privation. The idea is that just as cold doesn’t technically exist, what you have is a lack of heat. In the same way, evil is not a thing, it is corrupted good.<sup>8</sup> Evil is not part of the created order. Rather, the good things God has made have been defiled.

H. I made a few other points.

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<sup>6</sup> In Christopher Benson’s review of *On Evil*, by Terry Eagleton, he writes, “Eagleton... argues against two prevailing viewpoints: ‘Either human actions are explicable, in which case they cannot be evil; or they are evil, in which case there is nothing more to be said about them.’ The first viewpoint besets our sanguine politicians, journalists, and social scientists who tend to explain away evil, while the second besets our dour theologians and ministers who invoke ‘evil’ as a conversation stopper. Evil—like God—is neither fully comprehensible nor unfathomable, but partially explainable. Eagleton insists that our explanations of evil may sharpen or soften moral judgment. Christopher Benson, “Tragic Humanism,” *Christianity Today*, September 2010, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> As Lewis argues, there is no such thing as 100 percent evil. For something to be completely evil is to be nothing. Satan has good attributes – intelligence, for instance. The problem is, it is all corrupted. In a review of N.T. Wright’s book, *Evil and the Justice of God*, Samuel Wells defines evil as, “a black hole, a missing rung in the ladder, or a hole in the road...” Samuel Wells, “God’s Justice” *Christian Century*, Aug. 21, 2007, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Death is evil because it’s the loss of life; illness is evil because it’s the loss of health; adultery is wrong because it’s the loss of love and trust. But like cold, evil is more of the absence of something than something itself. (There is no such thing as cold – it is simply the absence of heat.)

1. I noted that when I say I believe in the devil I am not suggesting that I believe in a guy in a spandex red suit with pitch fork and horns – I wish that was what we were up against.

2. And that while I do not think we need to live in fear of evil or Satan, it would be helpful to stop forgetting about him.

I. We now turn to the Luke 11:14-28. You heard it read. Jesus casts a demon out of a man who has been unable to speak for some time.<sup>9</sup> It's one of a handful of passages<sup>10</sup> in which Jesus and Satan – Good and Evil – seem to be facing off; and it's also one in what will become a long list of passages where Jesus bests the religious leaders who try to trap or misrepresent him. We will see more of these as he approaches Jerusalem.

1. In this instance, they suggest that the only reason Jesus can defeat evil is because he is the prince of evil. They say, “By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.”

a) Beelzebul (which is sometimes written Beelzebub) is one of a handful of different names used to refer to Satan. It had links to the derogatory Jewish expression for Baal.<sup>11</sup> The English word is a transliteration from the Latin and is often softened to the phrase “Lord of the Flies” – which was where Golding got his title. The point of all this being, linking Jesus to Beelzebul was about the worst insult they could come up with.

b) Christ's response is very straightforward. In debating parlance it's a *reductio ad absurdum*. He shows how shallow their thinking is, by suggesting that a kingdom divided against itself can't stand, which is a comment the Jews – whose nation had split in two and then fallen hard – would be very sensitive to. Clearly, Jesus is taking them on.

c) And the other things he says make it clear that they are not skeptics, they are simple cynics. They are not appropriately cautious, they have decided they are against him and are now throwing anything they can think of at him to see what might stick.

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<sup>9</sup> The parallel account in Matt. 12:22-30 suggests that he was blind in addition to being mute.

<sup>10</sup> Though many think Jesus is casting demons out of just about everyone – and that every healing is the result of an exorcism, that is not the case. There are only six substantive interactions involving a demon.

<sup>11</sup> The Jewish expression/ nickname for Baal was the Hebrew term for excrement (zebul).

2. Luke records some other unsettling comments by Jesus in this passage.<sup>12</sup> He is never predictable. Never tame. He tends to be unsettling. So there are other topics here, but let's stay with evil.

V. My goal for this series is that you gain confidence for the challenges we face. Evil is one of them. Next week it's death. There are a half dozen big-ticket items that cause us grief. My argument – make that Luke's – is that we do not have to live in fear of these things. Jesus is more powerful than they are.

A. That doesn't mean we water ski across the top of all the waves. The Bible doesn't suggest that. Indeed, this passage – and the rest of the Gospels and the Book of Acts and 2,000 years of church history – all suggest that a lot of things can go wrong. But there are ways to find rest and hope in the midst of the challenges we face.<sup>13</sup>

B. We want life to be easy – and we are invited to pray to that end. But God is on record saying: In this world we will encounter various trials and that shouldn't surprise us.

C. What I would like to provide you with is some confidence that even when things unfold – when the bottom drops out you can find rest and peace in the confidence that a right view of God brings. You can sleep well knowing that God has everything under control. And right now that means, he is bigger than, stronger than, more powerful than the evil that is all around us – and even in our own hearts.

VI. Let me make three more points about evil.

A. In the previous message I argued: 1) evil is real; 2) evil is personal and 3) evil is the absence of – or corruption of – good.

B. Number Four: Evil is slippery.

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<sup>12</sup> It appears as though he makes a comment that distances himself from his Mom, but this is more likely an effort to charitably deflect the praise being shown to him.

<sup>13</sup> There may be stretches where that happens – and we are invited to pray for them and celebrate when they are happening! But that is not what we are told to expect, nor is it what we see on display in the Gospels or the Book of Acts, nor the history of the church since Acts closed.

1. It's deceptive. The problem is two-fold. First, evil wears a mask to conceal its utter vacancy. It often wants to be hard to identify. Secondly, we are not without sin. We are never perfect. Things are seldom clear cut. When we think that way it generally means we are not seeing the situation very clearly. We are blinded by our own biases.

2. In my notes I ran across an article I had clipped back in 2007. It came out just before the final Harry Potter book. The question was: is Severus Snape a good guy or a bad guy. It turned out he was good, but for a long time it was hard to tell. Evil is slippery, we are compromised and there is often enough moral ambiguity out there that it can be hard to be sure.

C. Number Five: Evil is a bully.

1. It blusters, threatens, confuses and scares people, but it can only really do so with our permission.

2. Right? We are not left without armor for the battle. And when we stand in Christ – which is what we are called to do. Please note we are not told to take evil on under our own power. We are told to flee evil. We are told to be on guard against evil because it is prowling around waiting for us. But when we stand with Christ we stand on the winning side, even if we are taken out.

3. After the Soviet Empire collapsed – imploded, surprising just about everyone, including the CIA – my overriding emotion was embarrassment. I remember being scared of the Soviet Union and their nuclear bombs and concerned by their aggressive state-driven atheism. In hindsight I thought, there was so little there. It was largely smoke and mirrors.

4. Paul is a great example of the kind of fearlessness we are to have. He does not discount the power of evil, but he trusts so completely in God and he is so profoundly shaped by a view of eternity, that he cannot be rolled.

D. Number Six: Evil is often advanced by those who think they are doing good.

1. Much of the evil we face is from people who think they are right and doing the right thing.<sup>14</sup> Not all of it, but a lot of it. And that includes us.

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<sup>14</sup> We must understand that horrendous evil... is almost always motivated by some vision of good, no matter how distorted. (Rose Marie Berger, "The Silence of Cain," *Sojourners*, p. 41.)

2. If you focus on Jesus's actions and comments in the Gospels, you do not come away worried about demons, they only come up a few times.<sup>15</sup> You come away worried about the Pharisees. To be more specific, you come away worried that you are a Pharisee – that is, a religious conservative who is trying hard to be good but who is blind to their own self-righteousness and the darkness in their own heart.

3. We mock the Pharisees, but by just about any objective measure, we – religious conservatives – are the Pharisees. You have to understand, these guys were trying hard to be holy. Their problem ultimately was they profoundly misunderstood Jesus and were blind to their own sin. They thought they could get to heaven by being good. We do not make that mistake, but we lean in that direction. Look, there is nothing wrong with trying to be good. We are told to do no less. But we think too highly of our own efforts and opinions and can easily fall into self-righteousness.<sup>16</sup>

4. And we are hardly alone. Many people who think they are right and have a righteous zeal end up doing a lot of harm. Navigating the lines of good and evil are not as clear as we'd like to think.

5. Clearly, Solzhenitsyn was right when he said: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

6. It is hard to balance the biblical conviction and courage that we are called to with the humility that we are also called to – and which Jesus displayed. He stands toe to toe against evil, and pushes hard to protect those who are being hurt by it. But not when he is the one being hurt. He does not defend himself when evil attacks him.

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<sup>15</sup> Supernatural evil is not a big topic in the Bible. Jesus was the first to go toe-to-toe with evil. The Old Testament prophets were not strangers to miracles. They occasionally multiplied food, healed the sick and raised the dead. But they never cast out any demons. All of this seems to be pretty limited to Jesus. In *All In*, Mark Batterson picks up on this when he writes, "I haven't met many people possessed by a demon, but I've met a lot of people possessed by their possessions." (Mark Batterson, *All In*, p. 27).

<sup>16</sup> It is hard to think about our efforts at all without falling into a self-righteousness. Humility may be one of the greatest tools we have against evil.

7. Let me repeat point six: The most dangerous kind of evil is the evil that thinks it's good. We need a measure of humility that is uncommon.

VII. Which leads to the final point – the one I want you to leave with. We can stand against evil when we stand with Christ. And in fact, we must!

A. There is more that could be said.

1. I would be remiss if I didn't tell you to stay away from evil in all its expressions. I've not had much experience with demons and dark forces. I have friends – especially those who have served on the mission field – who have. I have prayed for people who tell me they are possessed. But I do my level best to avoid any of the stuff that is intentionally dark. I stay away from Ouija boards and Palm readers. I do not go to Séances or watch the movies that glorify spiritual evil. Why? Life is too short. There is no reason to go towards any of that. Remember, evil is parasite. It's broken, boring and banal and just waiting to suck all your blood. It has nothing to offer. I think Simone Weil was spot on when she wrote, "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating." Run from evil.

2. I would also be remiss if I didn't tell you that we can't simply focus on not being bad. We are called to do good. The goal is not simply to avoid evil; the goal is to be holy, gracious and loving. The goal is to serve others. The goal is not just to have a strong defense. The goal is to have a strong offense.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The idea that the gates of hell will not prevail assumes we are playing offense.

3. There is more – we can combat evil with prayer and Scripture, and to be specific, there is more in the notes for this week, which are available – as always – for you to access on line. And there are some great small group questions for you to discuss in your group.

B. But what I want you to leave aware of, is that when you stand with Christ you stand on the winning team. And we need to take a stand. We need to challenge bullies and work to dismantle broken systems. We need to help those who are getting pushed down. It may be hard, but it is the right thing to do.

1. God is greater than Satan. Good is greater than evil.

2. Leith Anderson, a pastor up in Minnesota, was giving a talk on Satan and he had brought up one of his grandchildren's stuffed lions to use when he talked about the devil. I Peter 5:8 reads:

a) Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

3. But then he said there is a real lion – and he went to Revelation 5, which refers to Jesus as both lion and the lamb. And he said, this is the one who wins.

a) And they wheeled out this massive lion that he got from the zoo – and it was fifty times larger than the stuffed animal.

b) I couldn't figure out how to do that. If I was still in college I might have asked some of my fraternity brothers if they could temporarily borrow one of the lions from the front of the Museum of Art – one of those several ton granite iconic lions. Just to compare.

C. Men and women, we do not have to be scared about evil. Jesus is bigger than evil. God wins.

D. Let's pray.

## VIII. Questions

A. Do you have an ongoing sense that we are at peace or at war?