

Jesus' Response to Atheism & Agnosticism Luke 11:14-36

The coherence of this passage is not obvious, at least, not at first glance. But Luke gives an early signal that he intends it for reading – well, since first-century illiteracy ran roughly 90% of the populace, for *hearing* – as a single unit. In 11:14-15, he introduces some who attribute Jesus' dramatic exorcisms to demonic power. In 11:16, he references just the opposite, others who fault Jesus for *not* performing sufficient acts of spiritual power. He recounts Jesus' response to the former in 11:17-28, and to the latter, in 11:29-36. This results in the narrative pattern: a, b, a', b'. So Luke finds coherence between the two narratives, and intends them to be read as a single account.

Additionally, in each half of the account, Jesus concisely offers several points in rebuttal of the respective accusation. Consequently, the overall narrative is tightly packed with content, so reading it requires a level of concentration that we may not be used to, or comfortable with. Still, since Luke expects an illiterate audience to grasp the point when simply hearing it, we rightly take whatever effort is required to read it with understanding.

Day 1: Luke 11:14-16 Diabolically powerful? Or impotent? Which is it?

Jesus' audience had opportunity to see him at work, healing the disabled and casting demons out of the possessed. Still, most did not believe in him. Some attributed his power to Satan; others, antithetically, accused him of powerlessness.

If those who saw Jesus perform miracles resisted believing in him, it should not surprise us to find resistance to Jesus – and to our sharing the gospel – today. By the end of this passage, Jesus will offer an explanation for human resistance to the gospel. For the moment, it is salutary to observe that if people resisted him, they will resist our sharing about him. So on those occasions when our attempts to share the gospel prove unfruitful, let us not automatically assume that the fault is ours, and with our presentation of the gospel, or our persuasive abilities. And let us respond as Jesus did, persisting in telling others about the gospel.

Day 2: Luke 11:14-16 Powerful or impotent: Why these two options?

Both accusations share the same assumption: if Jesus is truly from God, he will demonstrate it with acts of preternatural power. The one group acknowledges his power, but attributes it to Satan; the other denies his power. Yet both work from the premise that the presence of God is expressed through acts of power.

That assumption is reasonable for a people whose defining moment in history was the deliverance from Egypt through plagues and sea: if Jesus stands in the

succession of Moses, he too should perform feats of great power. (Of course, he did so: healing, casting out demons, stilling the storm, and so forth.)

For one reason or another, people are less inclined today to expect God to attest his presence in acts of power, and give little attention to the attesting value of such accounts of Jesus' miracles and exorcisms. More often today, validation is sought either through rational proof or through emotional satisfaction. That is, we hold to those notions that we can establish logically or demonstrate empirically, or else to those which make us feel affirmed and valued.

Despite the difference, however, the underlying phenomenon remains constant: no less than in Jesus' time, people still tend to establish a set of criteria by which they evaluate Jesus and his claims. While this may seem reasonable at one level (it is certainly how we should approach, for example, politicians and their claims), at another level it sets us above him, as adjudicator of what is true or false. We set ourselves up as his judge, rather than acknowledging that he is ours.

These realizations influence our evangelistic efforts in at least two ways: (a) it encourages us to be prepared to give the sort of evidence for Jesus' claims that people are currently seeking (whether logical proof, personal experience, a loving community, character transformation, or so on); and, (b) at the same time, it reminds us to challenge the human predilection to set ourselves up as adjudicators of Jesus' claims rather than as subjects of his reign.

Day 3: Luke 11:17-19 Is it Satan who empowers Jesus to cast out demons?

Jesus offers two lines of evidence that his power does not originate with Satan: first, that would entail civil war in the evil empire; secondly, all other Jewish exorcists would be vulnerable to similar accusation.

Such an accusation seems unimaginable today, because Jesus is universally acclaimed, even by those who reconstruct him into a form that he himself would not recognize. Jesus is so characteristically the 'good guy' – even to those who would deny his divinity or his sinlessness – that we are never likely to have to defend him from such accusations today. So these verses do not apply at that level.

At the same time, we can at least learn from Jesus' example, to be prepared to address objections to the gospel, and to refute them (albeit graciously). Plenty of literature exists – both advocating atheism and defending Christianity – that understanding the issues, objections, and responses takes only a modest amount of effort.

Are you equipped to defend Jesus in the face of today's common objections? If not, what can you do to develop such skills?

Day 4: Luke 11:20-28 What Jesus' exorcisms actually demonstrate ...

Given that Jesus is not impotent but drives out demons, and given that he does so not by the power of Satan but by the hand (ancient idiom, by the 'finger') of God, then this means that God has begun to intervene in the world, to assert his sovereignty over his creation, and to restore its pristine state (11:20-22).

It also means that Jesus is God's vice-regent. So everyone must choose: embrace Jesus or reject him: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (11:23). There is no middle ground.

The consequences of this decision are enormous. Those who hear Jesus only to reject him reinforce their captivity to Satan (11:24-26). Those – and only those – who hear Jesus and obey are, in contrast, blessed (11:27-28).

This reminds us of the blessing that is ours in Christ, and of the urgency of our evangelistic efforts, to help others transfer from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God.

Day 5: Luke 11:29-32 The Sign of Jonah

Even after Jesus performed an exorcism – and an exorcism powerful enough for some to think him empowered by the great Satan himself – others insist that they have not yet seen enough, and call for more acts of power to override their skepticism. Jesus refuses to provide more proof, arguing that they already have more than enough.

His audience has more proof than God ever gave the wicked Ninevites: all they had was the preaching of Jonah. His audience has more proof than God ever gave the queen of Sheba: all she had was the teaching of Solomon. Still, with more limited evidence, these pagans responded positively to God, Jonah, and Solomon. Consequently, at the final judgment, the Ninevites and the Queen of the South will testify against Jesus' contemporaries. In a dramatic reversal of first-century Jewish expectations, it is pagans who will testify against Jews at the judgment of God. Or, to put it more plainly: these pagans were more responsive to God, and more holy, and with less convincing evidence, than Jesus' Jewish contemporaries.

This is a reminder that with hearing of the gospel comes responsibility: that those who hear about Jesus are responsible for how they respond. And the more they know, the more responsible. It is a sharp reminder to us who have known him for an extended time never to turn aside. It is also a reminder that the needs of the unreached warrant attention, that it is not necessary – or balanced – for Americans to have countless opportunities to hear the gospel, countless translations of the Bible so that they can read the gospel, countless churches where they can learn about the gospel, while much of the world still has no opportunity to hear about Jesus.

Day 6: Luke 11:33-36 Two Lamps: One Shining Brightly, the Other ???

Here Luke – or Jesus – combines multiple sayings about light to point out where the problem lies when people reject Jesus. Unsurprisingly, the problem is not with the clarity or accuracy of Jesus' self-revelation. It is not as though he has taught secretively, or performed too few miracles to convince the open-minded: his lamp shines clear and bright on its stand, so that all may come and see (11:33).

Why, then, don't all come and see? Because their eyes are not seeing, but blind. They have cataracts: the light of Jesus can shine on them, but it cannot pass through their eyes to illumine their souls (11:34-35).

This is Jesus' judgment on those who reject the gospel. That they refuse not because his preaching is unclear, or obscure, or unpersuasive. They refuse the gospel because their hearts are dark, stubborn, hard.

Still, Jesus does not reject those who reject them. He calls them to reflection, to self-examination, to repentance. He calls his opponents to put aside hostility, to soften their hearts, and to open their minds, to come to Jesus so that they can come to God.

This is not to suggest that those of us who have embraced him are somehow morally superior. Our condition is indeed superior: our whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it is completely lighted. Yet this is not to our credit but to his: it is not our inner light which illumines us, but the light of his lamp which shines upon us.

So we respond in two ways: in prayer for those we know who still resist him; and in praise for his shining on us.