

# Groucho, Harpo, and Jesus

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Can a Christian be demon possessed?

I've known people who I thought had been possessed by the demon of stupidity.

We do know that demons exist, and that they're at work in the world. The Bible is clear about this.

And we know that people can be possessed by demons — meaning that the demons actually move in and guide the individual's actions. The Bible is clear about this too.

On the other hand, there's no need to worry about a demon slipping into my body while I'm sleeping tonight. There's nothing in Scripture to indicate that anyone can be possessed by a demon without first giving the demon permission.

It would be tragic to make more of this than it's worth, and live the rest of your life in fear, seeing a demon around every corner.

It would also be a mistake to blame demons for all of our behavior and bad choices.

Years ago I visited a little church in a tiny town in the Midwest. As part of their Sunday morning service, they had people come forward if they needed prayer. A woman came forward, sick with symptoms of the flu, and the pastor proceeded to pray that the "demon of influenza" would come out of her. A man and woman came forward with their little boy — they were having problems with him, and the pastor "cast out the demon of rebellion."

These people were giving the devil way too much credit — and way too much blame. They were saying, in effect, not only had demons taken up residence inside of these Christian people, but *also* that their problems weren't the result of their own choices or actions — like disobeying Mom and Dad, or letting someone who has the flu cough and sneeze on you. Instead, they were saying, these things are simply the result of having some demon inside of us!

If this were how Jesus intended for us to look at the world, if this were how he intended us to interpret our circumstances, then as we study his teachings we could expect to find him giving us demon-resistance lessons over and over again. How to identify the demon that's controlling you. How to speak to the demon that's controlling you. How to cast out the demon that's controlling you.

But that's not what he talked about. Again and again, he communicates the same message that he gave to the woman at Simon's house (**Luke 7:50**) that we looked at in our previous session: *you're* in control. *You* make the choices. You rely on my Holy Spirit within you, and I will guide you into seeing the healthy choices you

can make. But in every case, it's going to be *your call*. And look at the timing; the timing is crucial here. When we entrust our lives to Christ, we give him our past, our present, and our future, and his Spirit begins to live in us, *from that very moment*. There is no example in all of Scripture of somebody trusting Christ and then needing to have a demon cast out of them.

So what should our attitude be, as Christians, about the “dark side” of the supernatural world — and our relationship to it? Jesus offered a kind of seminar on the subject in **Luke 11:17-26**. He drove a demon out of a man, the man's disability instantly vanished, and for the most part the crowd was amazed. But some were uneasy about the whole demon-casting thing. They didn't like the idea of a religious leader dealing with the occult. Mess with that stuff, they implied, and you're practically one of them. In fact, they suggested that Jesus was operating under the authority of Satan himself.

But Jesus (his X-ray vision always “on”) “**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?’**” (Luke 11:17,18).

It is a law of physics — dutifully played out in the spiritual world — that two entities cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Christ is in us — we know he is, from the moment we give him our life. (**1 Corinthians 6:19** says “...**your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God**”). The enemy can't also be in the place that Christ occupies.

Now — is it really this simple? All or nothing at all? Are we missing something here? Jesus, seeing right through us, seems to know we're going to ask these questions — because he goes on. He lays out three important concepts for us to keep in mind when we think about the supernatural world, the influence of the enemy in our lives, and the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. (Warren Wiersbe outlined these ideas in his *Bible Exposition Commentary*.)

These concepts involve three questions: **(1) Who's stronger? (2) Where's the middle ground? And (3) What's “enough”?**

First, Who's stronger? Here's the answer: ***Whoever is stronger wins the battle***. There is no account in all of the gospels of a demon casting Jesus out. It's always the other way around.

Are you afraid of demons? Do you have a sense of ill ease even watching this 20-minute video about demon influence? Jesus says, *Nuts to that fear. Look at my track record*.

Here's how he paints the picture, in **Luke 11:21,22**: “**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 the spoils.**”

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But “whoever’s stronger wins” isn’t the whole story. Jesus doesn’t stop there, in his seminar in Luke 11. Instead, he raises the stakes.

Because maybe when I look at the answer to question #1 I’m inclined to say, “Hey, great — I’ve given my life to Christ, he’s stronger than any evil influence, he’s going to win, so it doesn’t matter what I do. It doesn’t matter what choices I make, who I hang around with, what activities I engage in, what kinds of fantasies I create for myself. It doesn’t matter whether I apply myself to spiritual disciplines, doesn’t matter whether I read my Bible and develop a lifestyle of communication with God, a healthy prayer life. It doesn’t matter what kind of life I lead — because Jesus is stronger, and he’s going to win!”

No.

Jesus says in **Luke 11:23**, “**He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.**”

Every spirit at work in the world is either for me or against me — either supportive of my relationship with God, or destructive to my relationship with God.

This is the second of Jesus’ three crucial concepts on the subject.

Question #2 is: Where’s the middle ground?

Answer: ***There is no middle ground.***

There are no neutral players in this game. There are no neutral soldiers on this battlefield. Every spiritual influence in my life is significant, because it directs me either *toward* Christ or *away* from him.

The implications are intimidating.

How careful do I need to be?

Demon activity of any kind in a Christian’s life always starts in an area of *consistent, deliberate, unrepented sin*. An area that isn’t given over to God. An area where we don’t rely on the voice of his Spirit within us for direction. An area where we still want to manage our own way. This inevitably becomes an area of spiritual weakness, and evil influences have a way of collecting there.

Look — for good or ill, we are in control. Even though the Holy Spirit is in us from the moment we trust Christ, *we control the extent of his influence in our lives*.

And as Jesus tells us here, in Luke 11, this is not a casual decision. It’s a crucial decision.

We need to let him influence us because “he who does not gather with me, scatters.” My spiritual life is going to improve — *OR* — it’s going to deteriorate.

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Finally, Jesus says, ***just getting the “bad” out isn’t enough.***

There’s more to be done.

Look at the example of Jesus himself. He could be found casting out demons all through his ministry, yet he rarely made a big deal out of it. It’s almost as if he were saying, “I’m not too impressed by this demon stuff, and you shouldn’t be either — because I’m not here primarily to drive evil spirits out. This is not just about getting the evil out of people. It’s about *replacing evil with good*. It’s not just

about getting cleansed from sin. It's about *filling up to overflowing with the influence of the Holy Spirit.*"

What a waste if Jesus casts out a demon — and nothing else happens!

And this principle applies to followers of Christ as fully as it applies to anyone — even if it's impossible for a Christian to be possessed by a demon.

**"When an evil spirit comes out of a man,"** Jesus went on to explain to his detractors in **Luke 11:24-26**, **"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 man is worse than the first."**

I may have my house swept clean and put in order. I may have given my sins to Christ and taken him up on his amazing offer. I may have received the gift of God's grace. But if I'm not leaning back on him in my everyday life, if I'm not trusting his instincts and his influence in my decision-making, if I'm not letting him work in me and through me day by day, if I'm not learning to walk in the Spirit and live in the Spirit — then I am making myself vulnerable to the influence of the enemy. In fact, I am making myself a prime target.

We might think of life as a drinking glass, to be filled with the oil of evil influence — or the H<sub>2</sub>O of Christ's influence. I start out full of oily sin, utterly contaminated. But Christ is the "Living Water." I trust Christ, he comes to live in me (as Jesus says specifically in John 14:17). Jesus completely empties the grungy oil of sin out of the drinking glass of my life. All the sin is gone.

How much of me is occupied by the Spirit of Jesus now? Am I "full" of the Spirit? It's up to me. Jesus is willing to fill me up completely, immediately. But do I let him? What do I fill my drinking glass back up with?

No matter what I decide, Jesus isn't going to let me go. I'm going to heaven, he's not going to give up on me. But he also doesn't make me a machine. He doesn't strip me of control. I still have the freedom to let him influence me, or not. So *I* decide how to fill up my life.

Let's say there are two new Christians — two people who have just decided to follow Christ. We'll call them Harpo and Groucho.

Harpo says to himself, "What should I do about my self-destructive habits? I'm going to give those to Christ. I want his influence to prevail in those areas of my life."

And he adds a little of the water of Christ's influence to the drinking glass of his life.

"What am I going to do about my sex life?" Harpo asks himself. "It isn't constructive. It isn't how God designed me to relate to people sexually. I'm going to give my sex life to Christ. I want his influence to prevail in that area of my life."

And he adds a little more water to his drinking glass.

"Now what about my financial life?" Harpo asks himself. "Let Christ rule and reign in that area of my life."

He adds more water to his glass.

“What about my anger?” More water. “Let Christ be my predominant influence!” He lets Jesus be his guide more and more completely. “What about this? What about that?” More water in the glass. More water in the glass. “I just want more of Jesus,” Harpo says. “More of his love. More of his direction. That’s how I’m most fulfilled. That’s how my life comes to be most satisfying and rewarding.” Until Harpo’s drinking glass is full to the brim with the Living Water of Christ’s influence!

But then here’s Groucho. Also a new Christian, but coming to different conclusions. “What should I do about my self-destructive habits?” Groucho asks himself. “Maybe I should give those to Christ.” He thinks a bit. “Well, on the other hand, maybe I’ll wait and see how this Christianity thing goes for a while.”

He doesn’t pour anything into the drinking glass of his life.

“What about my sex life?” Groucho asks himself. “Hey, come on. This is the 21st Century. I’m not going to be too hung up on sexual purity. What about my financial life? Well, maybe after I get the new car, then I’ll really, really ask God to lead me by his Spirit in my finances. What about my anger? What about this, what about that? Well, I’m doing more or less OK on my own. I don’t want to become some kind of religious fanatic, y’know.”

And Groucho’s glass is mostly empty.

Now here comes the enemy. I think of him as a miniature version of those flying gas stations that the Air Force uses to refuel fighter jets in the air — with a long fuel hose, like a mosquito’s nose.

He zooms onto the scene. He’s sworn to oppose the work of Christ in the world at every opportunity. He’s prowling around, according to 1 Peter 5:8, like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Looking for a place to land, someplace to squirt his fuel.

He gets to Harpo. His glass is practically full.

*Man oh man, the enemy grumbles, there’s hardly anyplace to light here. This guy is full of the Holy Spirit, and two entities can’t occupy the same space at the same time. Can’t come to rest there.*

He keeps on going.

Now he comes to Groucho.

He peers into the drinking glass of Groucho’s life.

*Hm! Christian! I see the Spirit of God there. Well, rats. I’ll never get HIM out of there.*

*But boy oh boy! There’s room left over in there! This is cool! I’m sworn to oppose the work of Christ in the world at every opportunity — and I can actually get some valuable work done here! What could be better than influencing the life of a Christian believer? Ha! I’m going to diminish this guy’s value to God’s Kingdom. I’m going to distract him. I’m going to upset his family. I’m going to disappoint his friends. I’m going to infect his church.*

But then the enemy cuts his engines and slows down.

*Wait — I won’t just swarm in all at once, so his spiritual alarm system goes off. No, I’ll*

*ease in quietly. Let's see now, where do I have some maneuvering room? What about his habits? Ooh, good, here's an area of weakness I can exert some influence in.*

And the enemy squirts a little oil into Groucho's drinking glass.

*What about his sex life? Ooh, that's good too.*

More oil.

*What about his financial life? Good, good.*

More oil.

*What about his anger? What about this? What about that?*

More oil. More oil. More oil.

Week by week, month by month, Groucho gets unhappier. More uncomfortable. He suffers more and more from a feeling of oppression. Of being far from God. A feeling of hopelessness engulfs him. Feelings of fear. Feelings of despair.

Both of these guys are Christians. We'll see both of them in heaven. Satan may never be able to take complete possession of Groucho. But that hardly matters — because Groucho has given him an opportunity to influence him so heavily.

Should we be scared? No. The Apostle John dealt with people who had been down this road. Here's what he wrote in **1 John 4:4** — talking about evil spirits that are working in the world right now:

**“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”**

The promise of God is emphatic. It is unilateral. Whenever I choose to give myself over to Christ's power in my life, he can drive out the evil influence. There is no question about it. Whoever is stronger wins.

But think of the loss I've already suffered by that time. Think of the pain I've already experienced by that time. Think of the pain I've inflicted on those around me by that time. All unnecessarily.

I can't make “avoiding evil” my priority. My priority has to be *filling up with good*. Filling up with the influence of the Holy Spirit. Every day. In every way. More and more.