

A Demonstration of Power

Lesson for July 9, 2023

Unit II: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Scriptural Background: Matthew 12:1-32

Printed Text: Matthew 12:22-32

Key verse: *“But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”* (Matthew 12:28, NIV)

There is a YouTube video of an adorable little girl trying to wriggle her way out of trouble with her mom in the great doughnut caper.

The mother, before leaving the kitchen, instructs the little girl not to eat the doughnuts – they are being saved for later. Upon returning to the kitchen, the mother finds a doughnut missing. The video shows the little girl denying she ate the doughnut while wearing crumbs and hiding the half-eaten doughnut behind her back.

Sometimes the truth is right in front of us, and the indisputable “crumbs of evidence” surround us and yet we refuse to accept or acknowledge the truth. There are always consequences for deliberately and knowingly rejecting the truth and choosing a lie.

Robert Dawson

In this week’s lesson we look at some religious leaders whom Jesus confronted with the undeniable truth of the Gospel and who refused to believe. In response to their rejection Jesus gives a frightening and sobering warning. He warns about a point of no return, a sin, or a place we can reach for which there is no remedy, no cure, and no forgiveness.

Key Terms

1. **Blasphemy** (verse 31) – The act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; profane talk. Slander; abuse.
2. **Demon-possessed** (verse 22) – The invasion of the body by an evil spirit or devil that gains control of the mind or soul, producing mental disorder, physical illness, or criminal behavior.
3. **Pharisees** (verse 24) – The members of a Jewish sect noted for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law.

Lesson Background

From the very beginning of Chapter 12 we see how the Jewish religious leaders wanted to do anything they could to discredit Jesus. They put everything He and His disciples did under a microscope. In verses 1-8, the Pharisees just happened to see Jesus and His disciples walking through the grain fields plucking grain to eat. Even though Jesus was not breaking the law, but their traditions, they condemn Jesus and His disciples for breaking the Sabbath. In verses 9-14, Jesus comes into the synagogue, a place of worship, and at this time the Jewish leaders wanted to find a reason to accuse Him of sin, and they do so when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. In Mark's account of this, we are told that Jesus was angered because of the hardness of their hearts. They end up leaving after He does the miracle to conspire with one another how they might kill Him.

In this week's lesson, Matthew describes the third of four confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Finding themselves unable to deny the miraculous power Jesus has, the Pharisees accuse Him of being a demonic agent. Jesus denies their charge and tells them that the kingdom of God has come upon them.

Matthew 12:22-32 not only marks an irreversible point in Jesus' relationship with the Scribes and Pharisees, but it also marks a change in His presentation of Himself. Up to this time His major method of teaching the people was direct with illustrations to make the point. After the confrontation that is recorded in this passage, Jesus' major method of teaching will be in parables. Why? Matthew 13:11-14 tells us specifically that it is so the truths of the kingdom can be revealed to those who belong to it, while at the same time those truths will be hidden from those that do not belong to the kingdom.

Lesson In Depth

I. Is This the Son of David (Matthew 12:22-24)

In these verse two things happen – a healing and an accusation.

A man who was demon possessed was brought to Jesus; the effect of the demon possession was that he was blind and mute. Most of Christianity would affirm that true believers cannot be demon-possessed, because they have the Holy Spirit indwelling. But they can be attacked and afflicted by forces in this world, for spiritual war is against such powers, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians.

Jesus healed him, so that he could see and talk once again. That is it – a brief report. The real point of interest is in the teaching to follow.

And the people who saw this were amazed, wondering if this could be the "Son of David." The way the Greek text words the question indicates that the people were not sure of the answer: "This couldn't be the Son of David, could it?" Messiah was expected to perform miracles (see v. 38), and so the exorcism was an indication that Jesus might be the Messiah. But the people could not yet see past the situation, and Jesus did not look the part of the Messiah, even though He was doing these things.

The Pharisees, however, said that He cast out demons by Beelzebub. This Beelzebub is identified here as the prince of demons, or Satan. The name appears to come from the Old Testament world, from either ba'alzebub, "lord of the flies," or from a take-off on ba'al zebul, "prince Baal." The Greek text has it Beelzeboul, suggesting perhaps "lord of dung," or "lord of heights"--however the people referred to Satan in those days. One suggestion by MacLaurin is that it meant "lord of the house," meaning the head of the house of demons (Nov 1978:156-160). This would explain why Jesus presents Himself here as the head of a house, the household of God that cannot be divided. At any rate, the leaders were therefore trying to turn the people against Jesus by claiming His miracles were diabolic, empowered by Satan.

II. A House Against Itself Cannot Stand (Matthew 12:25-29)

Jesus' argument is very clear – any kingdom, city, or house (Matthew does not mention the house, but see Mark 3:20,23) that is divided against itself will fall. This would be true of Satan's kingdom; for the prince of demons to be casting out his demons would be foolishness because they were there doing his work. So, if Jesus is casting out demons, he cannot be working for Satan.

Jesus turns the argument back on them. If this work is empowered by Satan, then Satan must also be empowering their own disciples (their "sons") who do the same kind of ministry on occasion.

On the contrary, if Jesus is doing these miracles by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom is coming to them. The miracle had to be by Satan or by the Spirit of God--and it is illogical to think it would be by Satan. And Jesus knows full well that He has done these things by the Spirit of God, and if the Spirit of God is at work, then the Kingdom of God has dawned on them, the King is present.

And Jesus knew their thoughts: He not only heard their blasphemous words, but was privy to their secret thoughts. He knew their vile malicious intentions and designs, with what view they expressed themselves in this manner, on purpose to reproach him. And set the people against him, contrary to the inward light of their minds, and dictates of their consciences

But the most conclusive reasoning, and the most astonishing miracles, was lost upon a people who were obstinately determined to disbelieve everything good, relative to Christ. How true is the scripture, "*He came unto his own, and his own received him not*" (John 1:11).

A soul under Satan's power, and led captive by him, is blind in the things of God, and dumb at the throne of grace; it sees nothing and says nothing to the purpose. Satan blinds the eyes by unbelief and seals up the lips from prayer. The more people magnified Christ, the more desirous the Pharisees were to vilify him. It was evident that if Satan aided Jesus in casting out devils, the kingdom of hell was divided against itself; how then could it stand!

If Satan is divided against himself, he acts contrary to his own interest, which is to keep possession of the bodies and souls of men; and consequently, it must in course, be subversive of his power and dominion:

How shall then his kingdom stand: He will never be able to maintain his authority, and keep up the show of a government, as he does: Our Lord's argument, and which is his first, for others follow, is, that since Satan, who is so cunning and crafty, can never be thought to act such an opposite part to himself.

It was evident that if Satan aided Jesus in casting out devils, the kingdom of hell was divided against itself; how then could it stand! And if they said that Jesus cast out devils by the prince of the devils, they could not prove that their children cast them out by any other power.

Therefore, they shall be your judges: They condemn you and your argument. They are conclusive witnesses against the force of your reasoning. Jesus was not satisfied by showing them the fundamental absurdity of their argument. He showed them that it might as well be applied to them as to him. Your disciples taught by you and encouraged by you, pretend to cast out devils. If your argument be true that a man who casts out devils must be in league with the devil, then "your disciples", and you who taught them, have made a covenant with him also. You must therefore either give up this argument or admit that the working of miracles is proof of the assistance of God.

The kingdom of God: Matthew's usual expression is the "kingdom of heaven" (3:2). Some have attempted to distinguish between the meaning of the two, but they likely mean the same thing.

Is come unto you (literally "has come upon you"): The Lord's power over demons was evidence enough that He was the Messiah. Hence, "spoil his goods ... house", refers to Satan as being defeated or ruined by the capture of souls from him for Christ by the gospel.

The Kingdom of God is come: That was precisely true. The King was in their midst, displaying His sovereign power. He showed it by demonstrating His ability to bind Satan and his demons. He was warning them here, that they were speaking out against God.

The "**strong man**" is meant the devil (see Isaiah 49:24), who is powerful and mighty, as appears from his nature, being an angel, though a fallen one, excelling in strength. This is another argument of Christ's proving that his casting out of devils could not be by Satan, but by the Spirit of God. For if he did not act by any superior power to Satan's, and such by which he was able to master, overcome, and bind him, he could never spoil his goods, as he did. Or dispossess devils out of the bodies or souls of men: just as if a man should enter into another man's house, who is strong and robust, with a design to spoil his goods. Who would never make use of the man himself to do it, and can never be thought to effect it, unless he has a power superior to his, and uses it.

Jesus also made it clear that He was the *stronger man* who was not captive under the **strong man**. His message was, "I'm not under Satan's power. Instead, I'm proving that I am stronger than he is by casting him out of those he has possessed." "The very fact that I have been able so successfully to invade Satan's territory is proof that he is bound and powerless to resist."
(Barclay)

Jesus looks at every life delivered from Satan's domination and says, "I'm plundering the kingdom of Satan one life at a time." There is *nothing* in our life that *must* stay under Satan's domination. The One who binds the strong man and will plunder his goods is our risen Lord.

III. The Unforgiveable Sin (Matthew 12:30-32)

You cannot straddle the fence. You are either the friend of Christ, helping win souls to Him, or you are His enemy, driving people away from God. There is no middle road. We cannot go uncommitted.

"The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost" is deliberate rejection of Christ, His Spirit-shaped miracles, and His salvation. It is the ultimate sin that by its very nature puts a man beyond the opportunity of salvation.

The Holy Spirit brings the offer of salvation to the heart of man. To reject Him is to act "arrogantly" and thus to "blaspheme" God. Those who reject His offer of salvation are in reality blaspheming the very nature of God Himself and the genuineness of His grace.

All sin is serious, and to some degree challenges and attacks the character and authority of God. But six sins are specifically identified as sins against the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is a person, He may be sinned against.

Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost: The sin He was confronting was the Pharisees' deliberate rejection of that which they knew to be of God (John 11:48; Acts 4:16). They could not deny the reality of what the Holy Spirit had done through Him, so they attributed to Satan a work that they know was of God (verse 24; Mark 3:22).

Since Jesus is also God, it is an extremely serious matter to be guilty of sinning against Him. These six sins are blaspheming (verses 31-32; Luke 12:10), lying or tempting (Acts 5:4, 9); despising (Hebrews 10:29); resisting or striving with (Genesis 6:3; Acts 7:51), vexing or grieving (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30), and quenching (1 Thessalonians 5:19), the Holy Spirit.

Because of the severity with which Jesus describes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, some people unnecessarily fear that they may have committed the unpardonable sin. One of the characteristics of such sin is that the Holy Spirit ceases to convict of sin in one's life, so the fact that someone may be concerned about a particular sin indicates he is not beyond grace. He should immediately repent of that sin to restore fellowship with God.

The keys to not sinning against the Holy Spirit are to:

1. Be led by the Spirit;
2. Be filled with the Spirit;
3. Be illuminated by the Spirit.

The word blasphemy translated means evil speaking. Then it goes on to say speaking evil of the Holy Ghost cannot be forgiven. My interpretation of the Scripture is as long as you are alive; you can get forgiveness for sin of any kind. However, if you die rejecting the salvation offered, there is no forgiveness for that.

It shall be forgiven him: Someone never exposed to Christ's divine power and presence might reject Him in ignorance and be forgiven, assuming the unbelief gives way to genuine repentance. Even a Pharisee such as Saul of Tarsus could be forgiven for speaking against Jesus or persecuting His followers, because his unbelief stemmed from ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13). But those who know His claims are true and reject Him anyway "sin against the Holy Spirit" because it is the Holy Spirit who testifies of Christ and makes His truth known to us (John 15:26; 16:14-15). No forgiveness was possible for these Pharisees who witnessed His miracles firsthand, knew the truth of His claims, and still blasphemed the Holy Spirit, because they had already rejected the fullest possible revelation.

Lesson Summary

In this passage the Pharisees quickly resume their attack on Jesus' ministry. Jesus cures a demoniac who was blind and mute. The crowds are astounded at this miracle and wonder if Jesus is the Son of David, a title associated with the expected messiah. Even the Pharisees cannot deny that Christ has extraordinary power over the demons. However, they are convinced that Jesus is not from God. Thus, their only other explanation for his ability to cast out demons is that it comes from Satan.

Jesus addresses the issue directly with the Pharisees. He shows the absurdity of their charge: A secular kingdom cannot stand if it is divided against itself, and neither can Satan's kingdom. Then he provides the real explanation of his exorcisms. Satan is being overwhelmed by someone much stronger than he.

Jesus compares Satan to a homeowner who has been tied up by a powerful robber. The homeowner can do nothing as he watches the robber plunder his house. This is an image of Jesus removing men and women from the "house", that is, the realm or control of the devil.

Jesus does not stop at correcting the Pharisees, but he warns them of the severe consequences they will face if they persist in their accusation against the Messiah. If Jesus expels demons not by Satan's power but by the Spirit of God, then the Pharisees are identifying God's Spirit with the devil. For this they will face a severe judgment. The kingdom of God has come upon you: God's kingdom is invading Satan's realm through Jesus' exorcisms, and the Pharisees are on the wrong side of the battle, standing in opposition to Christ. In this context, those who are not with Jesus and whoever does not gather with Jesus are the Pharisees who oppose Jesus.

Finally, Jesus speaks of the Pharisees committing the sin of blasphemy against the Spirit. To blaspheme the Son of Man would be to speak evil of Him, to discredit Him and His message in some way. Within the context of the argument at this point, this would refer to the rejection of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus. But if someone considered it further and repented, that one could be forgiven.

But the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would be the rejection of the same truth in the full awareness that that is what is happening--it is the thoughtful, willful rejection of the work of the Spirit of God even though there can be no other explanation of the healings of Jesus. Blasphemy against the Son and against the Spirit then means the complete and willful rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and the crediting of His works to Satan. Thus, this is not a sin that a true believer can commit, for the true believer has already accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

In Jewish law there must be two witnesses to establish any point. Here Jesus is showing that there are two witnesses to His being Messiah--His words and His works. If a person rejects His words, there is another witness that will authenticate His person--His works. But if someone rejects that too, completely, by blaspheming, then there is no other witness.

To put it the other way – there are two witnesses that will condemn a person: the rejection of the truth of the Gospel of Christ, and the attributing of his miracles to Satan. This adds up to complete and conscious rejection of Jesus. For those who maintain that opposition to Christ throughout their lives and never recant and turn, there is no forgiveness.

Understand that Jesus did not condemn His enemies because of what they said or because of any single act. Rather, He denounced them for their obstinate hardness of heart. Their words gave evidence of the evil in their hearts. Sin against the Holy Spirit is not a matter of speech; the words spoken are only "fruit" from a sin-filled heart. All sins can be forgiven, but one. The “unpardonable sin” is the sin of rejecting Jesus after the Holy Spirit has made Him known in your heart.