

EVIL, GOOD AND THE SPIRIT

Matthew 12: 22-37

Jesus has been in a confrontation with the Pharisees over the question of Sabbath healings. After a brief withdrawal he resumes his confrontation with the Pharisees in our reading today. The Pharisees are unable to deny Jesus's power, but attack him by questioning its source – they attribute Jesus's power to the devil. As we look at this passage together, you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's begin by looking at verses 22 and 23:

“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"” (verses 22-23)

Matthew recounts the miraculous healing very briefly, the main point of the story is the reaction of the people and the Pharisees. Jesus was already known both as an exorcist and as a physical healer (Matthew 9:32-34) – so events of this kind are already a recognised aspect of Jesus's ministry. I think the following verses make it clear that both the crowd and the Pharisees knew that this was both the exorcism of a demon and a physical healing. Certainly the crowd's comment in verse 23 – “Could this be the Son of David?” – makes it clear that for the first time that they are beginning to see Jesus as the Messiah. The defeat of evil by Christ is an essential element in the arrival of God's kingdom.

However, the positive reaction of the crowd in recognising Christ as Messiah is in sharp contrast to the reaction of the Pharisees. Look at verse 24:

“But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."” (verse 24)

The same event leads the Pharisees to a completely different conclusion from that of the crowds, because their minds are already made up. Jesus's supernatural powers demand a supernatural source, and since the Pharisees are not prepared to admit that this source is God there is only one alternative. They accuse Jesus of using evil forces and driving out demons by the power of Beelzebub, which was a popular name for Satan. In accusing Jesus, the Pharisees were in fact condemning themselves. They did not doubt that a miracle had truly happened, that the demons were cast out. But by attributing the work of God to the work of the devil, by saying that God's work was the work of Satan, they were blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, look at verses 25-28:
“Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (verses 25-28)

Jesus's initial response is the common sense point that if Satan helps in the driving out of demons then there is civil war in the demonic kingdom and human experience teaches us that it will not be able to stand. Jesus also accepts that other Jews unconnected with him are performing exorcisms and raises the question of how these exorcisms were performed. We know that such exorcisms were actually performed by the Jews both from the *Magical Papyri* and from Josephus who describes an exorcism at which he was present.

Jesus implies that the Pharisees believed that these other exorcisms were performed using God's power and adds that it can therefore be assumed that the exorcisms he performs also use the power of God. In verse 28 Jesus refers to performing exorcisms in the power of God's Spirit, because in a moment he will accuse the Pharisees of not just denigrating the work of a human being, but of denigrating the work of God's Spirit.

Jesus continues with a short parable:

““Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.” (verse 29)

This parable is not interpreted, but I think it’s clear that Jesus is referring to the rescuing of his people from oppression (Isaiah 49:24-25). Jesus’s exorcisms are not in collusion with Satan, but are a direct assault on his kingdom. The tying up of the strong man, the tying up of Satan, speaks of the superiority of Jesus’s kingdom and authority over that of Satan and the coming into force of the kingdom of God.

and Jesus then utters a short saying against the Pharisees:

““He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” (verse 30)

There is no middle ground, either we are wholly for Jesus or we are against him. If we are lukewarm towards the things of God, he will disown us, he will spit us out of his mouth (Revelations 3:16). Jesus’s opponents are spoilers trashing what Jesus and the disciples have carefully put together.

Now we come to what is perhaps one of the most misunderstood teachings in the Bible. Look at verses 31 and 32:

““And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (verses 31-32)

The saying about an “unforgivable sin” has often been inappropriately, and sometimes disastrously, applied to contexts which have little to do with its original setting and meaning. Jesus is specifically referring to what the Pharisees have just said. Earlier, in chapter 9 and verse 3, the scribes had accused Jesus of blasphemy; now the charge is being returned by Jesus.

Generally, to blaspheme, means to “speak against”. Here we are specifically referring to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the opening words ‘And so’ indicate that in this context blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to be understood in terms of the Pharisees’ charge in v. 24, attributing what is in fact the work of God’s Spirit (v. 28) to God’s ultimate enemy, Satan – when they knew, or certainly should have known, that this was not true. So the Pharisees are showing a complete perversion of spiritual values. They’re revealing a decisive choice of the wrong side in the battle between good and evil, the battle between God and Satan, against all the evidence enabling them to make a correct choice. It is this which has shown these Pharisees to be decisively “against” Jesus (v. 30).

It is this wilful and complete opposition to the good purpose of God in the face of clear evidence to the contrary and the perversion of ascribing the good work of God through the Holy Spirit to Satan which is ultimately unforgivable.

I need to emphasise this point here, because the language of this saying has sometimes been incautiously and incorrectly applied to real or supposed offences “against the Holy Spirit” which have nothing to do with the blasphemy of these Pharisees, and serious damage has been caused to worthy Christians. This saying is a wake-up call to the arrogant and prideful who are wilfully opposed to God’s purposes when they do or should know better. It’s not a bogey to frighten ordinary Christians who are doing their best to follow our Saviour. Unless you’re deliberately and persistently representing evil as good or good as evil in the face of the evidence this warning doesn’t apply to you and you can be completely assured of your forgiveness and of your place in God’s kingdom. God wants you to be confident of and completely assured of your salvation from the moment you turn to Christ in true faith.

Jesus goes on to speak further of what the Pharisees have said, look at verse 33:

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit.” (verse 33)
The imagery is of good and bad or perhaps good and rotten. It’s not a command to make a bad or rotten tree. The point is that our true nature can be perceived and we can be judged by how we behave.

This truth is drawn out in the following verses 34 and 35:

“You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” (verses 34-35)

The term “brood of vipers” seems to have been a term of abuse Jesus often applied to the Pharisees (Matthew 3:7; 12:34; 23:33) and the meaning derives from verse 33. Nothing good can come from the Pharisees because they are ‘bad or rotten trees’.

Jesus then speaks of the day of judgement in verses 36 and 37:

“But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” (verses 36-37)

This is a warning to be taken seriously, but again we need to interpret it in its context. Jesus isn’t really saying that we’ll be condemned for every careless word we might utter – although certainly we ought to pay heed to everything we say. Here Jesus is exaggerating to make his point, as he often did. It’s clear that the charges the Pharisees have laid against him are far from being careless words.

In verse 37 Jesus switches from speaking about the group he’s confronting or about humankind in general and turns to addressing us individually. So these words have personal application and we need to remember that our words are an important part of our salvation. We need to remember that we need to confess Jesus with our mouths in order to be saved. Look at the words of Paul in Romans chapter 10 verses 9 and 10:

“That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” (Romans 10:9-10 NIV)

Let's make sure that we are good trees, not rotten trees like the Pharisees, and that good things come out of our mouths, words of salvation that will bring us into God's kingdom to enjoy eternal life with him. For unless we confess Christ as Lord we will not be saved but condemned. In any event, whatever position we've taken during our lives, at the end of the age we will be forced to confess that Christ is Lord:

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11 NIV)

So let's confess Christ as our Lord and Master voluntarily now, right here right now this morning, so that by our words we will be justified. So that by our words we may be acquitted and not condemned. So that by our words our sins may be forgiven and that we will be reconciled to God and brought into His eternal kingdom.