

3 March 2024

# JESUS & BEELZEBUL

## 1. MATTHEW 12:22-37

**Today's Bible Passage:** <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

<sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

<sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup> And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

<sup>29</sup> "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 plunder his house.

<sup>30</sup> "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> "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 recognized by its fruit. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. <sup>35</sup> A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. <sup>36</sup> But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. <sup>37</sup> For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

## 2. INTRO

### 3. THE EXORCIST

- A. We saw last week that Jesus has been healing lots of people with health issues, and then in verse 22 the story pivots. We move from Jesus healing the sick to healing someone who was possessed by a demon. Now, I don't want to get lost in the tall grass here, there's plenty we can say (and even more that we can speculate if we're not careful) about demon possession. If you're not from a religious background, this might seem like a topic more for a horror film than a church service. You might be wondering—what do we as 21<sup>st</sup> century people make of this? I think our best aim here is to see that **Matthew mentions this possession, like several others in his Gospel, in a fairly dispassionate and matter-of-fact way.** That doesn't mean that it's not serious, but it does indicate that it's also not particularly unusual. Furthermore, note that nobody in this story is disagreeing that a demon is to blame for this man's illness—on that at least, everybody's on the same page.
- B. Those of you with particularly good memories may have noted that we've actually had a *very* similar story to this one a few chapters back! If you flip back to Matthew chapter 9, in verses 32-34 we have a very similar account, a demon-possessed man who could not talk was brought to Jesus, who healed him. Matthew tells us that the crowd was amazed, or at least *most* of the crowd was amazed...Look at verse 34: 'the Pharisees said "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."'
- i. So, you might ask, what's different here? I make at least three:
1. *The extent of the possession: In today's passage, the possessed man is both **blind** and mute, not just mute.*
  2. *The crowd's reaction: In chapter 9, the crowd was amazed; but in today's passage, they were **astonished**. In our English translations these might seem fairly equal terms, but the word Matthew uses in chapter 12 is unmistakably stronger—people are completely taken aback by what Jesus has done here.*
  3. *The accusation by the Pharisees: In chapter 9, they compare Jesus to the 'prince of demons', but here they go a step further, in addition to comparing him with the prince of demons they connect him with Beelzebul.*

### 4. THE LORD OF THE FLIES?

- A. So, who is this Beelzebul? Well, translated directly it means either 'the lord of the flies' or perhaps 'the lord of filth.' But what's more significant is that it was often used as a shorthand for Satan, without having to actually say 'Satan.' It's a bit like 'He who must not be named', or 'the orange former president'. It's a shorthand for someone infamous, it's something that everybody within the culture intuitively understood.

- B. What's going on with these Pharisees? Why are they making the accusation, and why *this* accusation?
- i. We saw, a few weeks ago in the section Ed preached on, that after Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath the Pharisees had resolved that they would plot together and find a way to kill Jesus. This morning's passage is their first attempt at putting this in motion.
  - ii. What's wrapped up in this accusation, then? Why connect Jesus' miracles to Satan? This is something they'd previously hinted at in chapter 9, but here they are making the connection explicit. **Notice that the Pharisees aren't trying to deny that something profoundly supernatural is going on here.** They aren't going to try and suggest to this astonished crowd that it's all an act, they're too smart for that.
  - iii. **Instead, they're trying to explicitly connect Jesus' healing and exorcising power to Satan.** Why would they do this?
    1. *The first point is pretty straightforward, it hits at the surface level—they're trying to undermine Jesus' credibility and cast doubts in at least some of the crowd's minds.*
    2. *But I think there's something deeper going on as well. If Jesus **was** doing these miracles by Satan's power, he would be deemed a sorcerer in the eyes of Jewish law and tradition. We can see this in the Jewish writings of the day. One of these, the Mishna says 'The warlock is also liable to be executed by stoning. One who performs a real act of sorcery is liable, but not one who deceives the eyes, making it appear as though he is performing sorcery, as that is not considered sorcery...The one who performs a real act of sorcery is liable, and the one who deceives the eyes is exempt.' (Mishna Sanhedrin 7:11)*
    3. *I think that the Pharisees are trying to back Jesus into a corner. If Jesus is doing parlour tricks, or planting actors in his audience to pretend to be demon possessed, then he's a fake, but there's no penalty under Jewish law for **pretending** to perform miracles.*
    4. *If, however, they can succeed in persuading the crowd that Jesus is indeed performing supernatural acts, but in alliance with Satan, then they can petition to have him stoned.*

## 5. JESUS' RESPONSES

- A. But before the Pharisees can follow up on their plan, Jesus issues a series of brilliant arguments in response. Notice the little clause in verse 25, Jesus 'knew their thoughts'. He knows what they're up to. It's like playing chess with someone who knows what move you're going to make ahead of time!

- B. Let's see what Jesus says: **If a Kingdom or city is divided against itself, it cannot stand.** He's beginning with what might be the most obvious critique against the Pharisees' charge. The young people in the crowd could have figured this one out! This phrase from Jesus has been used by lots of different people throughout history, perhaps most famously by the then-senate candidate Abraham Lincoln, who was running for a senate seat in Illinois in 1858, as the United States was beginning to fracture under the weight of the looming civil war. Let's finish the idea: **If a Kingdom or city is divided against itself, it cannot stand. Therefore, if Satan drives himself out, he is fighting against his own kingdom.** The image is clear enough: Satan had rendered this poor man both mute and blind. Unable to see, and unable to speak. Satan has removed the man's agency to communicate with others, and Jesus in one fell swoop gave it back to him. Satan, according to Jesus, wouldn't do this, because it would be to undermine himself. But Jesus takes it a step further, he leans into their argument and digs in deeper.
- C. Look at what he says in verse 27: 'If I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.' And here comes Jesus' second point: **If Jesus drives out demons by Beelzebul, how do the Pharisee's exorcists drive out demons?** He's on the offensive now. You see, Jewish figures performing exorcisms became a growing movement in the centuries in between the end of the Old Testament and the time of Jesus. But, what's interesting is that much of their practice seems to be grounded in the superstitions of the surrounding nations.
- i. It's interesting to note that **Jesus doesn't apparently deny the effectiveness of the Jewish exorcisms.** Did you notice this? We probably shouldn't make too much of this, because the main point seems to be him suggesting that no effective exorcisms are coming from Satan, rather that the Holy Spirit is the only means by which people can be freed in this way.
  - ii. Tom Wright has a helpful little paragraph here, he writes: 'there are other Jewish exorcists whose work meets with some success at least; are they in league with the devil as well? Of course not. Rather, Jesus' work is a sign of something that his contemporaries were longing for deeply, but were not expecting to look like this. God's kingdom was coming upon them, bursting in as a force, a power to be reckoned with, coming as the only true answer to the question: How is Jesus doing it?'
- D. So, how **is** Jesus doing it? He tells us in verse 28, in the form of a hypothetical statement: 'If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.' A few observations here:
- i. First, notice that this passage contains more references to the Holy Spirit than any other part of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus hasn't made broad and wide declarations that he is the Son of God and Saviour of the world yet, but **in identifying his miraculous works with the Spirit of God, and by teaching**

**with an air of authority that no other Rabbi would have done, Jesus is beginning to pull back the curtain and give his group of followers a bit of a deeper look into his nature and his mission.** This is very much a continuation of what we saw last time in Matthew 12:18, with the quote from the prophet Isaiah that Jesus is the chosen servant, in whom God delights, then notice what it says, ‘I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.’

- ii. Second, we need to look at this in light of the verses that follow—the images of the strong man’s house as well as the gatherers and scatters.
    1. *Did you find the strong man parable a bit odd? Is Jesus advocating burglary? No. The consensus among interpreters of the New Testament is **that the strong man Jesus is referring to here is Satan.** A key part to Jesus establishing his kingdom on earth is that Satan would be bound, limited in some way.*
    2. *According to the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas, this binding happened back when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the start of his earthly ministry. As Adam and Eve were tempted in the Garden of Eden and failed, Jesus too was tempted by Satan, but he triumphed against Satan’s temptations. Hauerwas writes: ‘Jesus faced Satan in the wilderness and was subjected to the worst that Satan could do, and yet he prevailed. He has, as Isaiah 49:24–25 says he would do, taken the mighty captive by refusing Satan’s terms of battle. Satan’s house not only can be, but has been, plundered through the work of the Holy Spirit.’*
- E. So what is Jesus getting at in his teaching so far? It’s that **these signs and wonders he’s performing aren’t the main event, they’re signs *pointing to the main event, which is the Kingdom coming to earth.***
- i. Note the change of language. Before in the Gospel we had language like the Kingdom was ‘at hand’ or was ‘drawing near’ but now the Kingdom was ‘upon you’. The Pharisees were expecting a physical reign and a physical enemy to conquer. They were expecting the Messiah to ride in and with God’s help kick the Romans out of Jerusalem, re-establishing the Kingdom of Israel. But they completely missed what Jesus was saying—he meant the arrival of a *spiritual* Kingdom. And the victory over the enemy? It’s a *spiritual* victory over Satan.
  - ii. And this all serves to undermine the Pharisees even more. Who would we expect to be the first ones to recognize what God was doing in the world? I think many of us would naturally assume the religious leaders—people who were trained in God’s word, people who had been longing for and anticipating God’s saving action in history. In short, the Pharisees of all people should recognize the works of God happening before their eyes...but they don’t.
  - iii. What’s more, they’ve dug themselves in even deeper. In trying to back Jesus into a corner and pin him as a sorcerer who achieves his miracles by the power of Satan himself, they are literally saying that the work of the Holy Spirit is actually the work of Satan.

- iv. We see Jesus doubling down on his language in verse 30, he says ‘whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.’ He’s saying, in unmistakable terms, that the Pharisees are pitting themselves against Jesus, against the Holy Spirit, and against the Kingdom of God. Jesus is accusing them of acting in outright opposition to everything they should be standing for. And note the implication, Jesus is literally saying that if you’re not with him, you’re against him, it’s a stark warning. Perhaps one that not enough people pay attention to today. Jesus’ ministry has *gathered* people who were able to plainly recognize God at work, but the Pharisees were trying not only to undermine Jesus himself but to cast doubt among his followers, to *scatter* them. And this leads us to Jesus’ biggest charge against them, that they’ve blasphemed the Holy Spirit.

## 6. BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE SPIRIT

- A. If you’re not coming today from a church background, you might have found Jesus’ statements on blaspheming the Holy Spirit a bit odd. Hey, even if you *are* coming from a church background, you’ve probably found his language a bit odd, and might be curious as to what I’m about to say in the time that we’ve got left.
  - i. I want to say a brief preamble: when we’re coming to tricky texts in the Bible, there can be a tendency to forget everything *else* the Bible says about a topic and get ourselves tangled up. I want to avoid that. But there can also be a tendency to downplay verses like these because they don’t seem to fit with a wider theology that we like, and therefore we try to just brush it off or find an easy way of solving the apparent problem. I want to avoid that as well.
- B. Notice Jesus’ language here. ‘Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.’ He goes further, ‘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.’
  - i. You might have some questions...I’ve got some too! What is it that makes this particular sin unforgivable? Why on earth can we be forgiven for everything literally up to nailing the Son of God to a cross, and yet these Pharisees are rebuked so harshly and definitively?
  - ii. I want to start by saying what I think this passage *doesn’t* mean.
    - 1. *It doesn’t mean that there are some sins we can accidentally stumble into and damn ourselves for all eternity.*
      - a. *If you’re sitting in this room and worried that there is something that you have done or thought that would keep you from being forgiven by Jesus, I want to assure you that this is not the case.*
    - 2. *If you’re a Christian and are wrestling with whether a sin you’ve committed since coming to Christ might cause you to lose your salvation...*

a. *I want to assure you that this is not the case.*

3. *Remember, we need to consider this passage in light of what we know from the whole Bible about the nature of God's love and forgiveness.*

C. So what does it mean, then?

- i. First, we need to look at who the Pharisees were blaspheming against in our passage. I said earlier that they thought they were taking shots at Jesus, but **in saying that Jesus was working by the power of Satan they were actually attributing to Satan the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.**
- ii. Second, we need to look at what the Pharisees *should have* believed about the Holy Spirit. At this stage in history, it's worth remembering that God's people didn't have the robust framework of the Trinity (God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). I found the commentator William Barclay helpful here. He wrote that the Jewish understanding of the Holy Spirit was essentially that the Spirit '1) brings God's truth to men and women; and 2) enables men and women to recognize and understand that truth when they saw it.' This is the kind of thing that would be known to all Jews, not just the elite Pharisees.
- iii. Third, we need to consider this in light of what Jesus has just been doing. What did Jesus do? I don't think it's a coincidence here that he had just liberated someone from a demon that had made him both blind and mute. The man physically couldn't see, and wasn't able to speak. Alongside this, we have Jesus heavily implying that the Pharisees in their stubborn legalism are not only *spiritually blind* to the work of God's Spirit in front of them, but are unable to declare their long-awaited Messiah as Lord when they meet him in the flesh. They can't see the truth, and they can't speak the truth.
- iv. So, if they are not just rejecting the Spirit of God's work before their eyes, but calling it the work of Satan, they are actively trying to undermine the coming of the Kingdom of God. And this is where we finally understand why their actions are unforgivable. It's not that they're doing something that can't be forgiven, it's that in rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus they are rejecting the only means by which they *could* be forgiven. Tom Wright puts it this way: 'Jesus is warning against looking at the work of the Spirit and declaring that it must be the devil's doing. If you do that, it's not just that you won't be forgiven; you can't be, because you have just cut off the very channel along which forgiveness would come. Once you declare that the only remaining bottle of water is poisoned, you condemn yourself to dying of thirst.'
- v. So how do we apply this? Let's look at how Jesus finishes up his teaching:

## 7. CONCLUSION: BY YOUR WORDS...

- A. Jesus says ‘I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned’.
- i. This is the culmination of the section. Jesus is underscoring that *words matter*, but they matter particularly because they represent what is in someone’s heart. The Pharisees weren’t just religious legalists, they had hatred and evil stored up within their hearts, and this surfaced in their accusations against Jesus.
  - ii. But Jesus is expanding his point beyond the Pharisees, beyond space and time. He says that *everyone* will have to give an account for what they’ve spoken. That’s you and me.
  - iii. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the premise that there’s nothing we can say in our defence that will exonerate us before God, there’s no argument that will be good enough. Our only defence is to acknowledge that we know we are sinners, and that we believe that Jesus is Lord.
    1. *According to Jesus, our words have condemned us. Lies, half-truths, gossip, hurtful insults, they all serve to condemn us, and what’s more they are an outward indication of our sinfulness.*
    2. *But don’t miss what Jesus has said: by your words you will be acquitted. If you’re wrestling with the weight of your sin, if you’re suffering from the effects of your sin, if you’re anxious about the consequences of your sin, there’s hope. Do you want to follow Jesus? It’s not about coming to church, or signing up for rotas, or anything like that. It’s two things: repent, and believe. Confess your sin before God, and believe that through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection you have been forgiven.*
  - iv. Have you repented, and have you believed? We’re going to take a brief pause and then reflect through singing a song of response. It’s a song that tells a story of becoming aware of who Jesus is and what he’s done for us. If this is true for you, sing it out and proclaim the wonder. And if it’s not true for you just yet, I want you to pay attention to the words, and ask yourself whether you’re hearing Jesus’ voice, and if you are I would encourage you, don’t harden your heart.