

“DAMNING OPINIONS” MATTHEW 12:22-32

Have you ever talked to a person whose mind is so made up about something that even when they are presented with solid evidence that contradicts or disproves their opinion, they still refuse to change their mind? Surprisingly, this kind of stubborn closed-mindedness is not merely found in people who are uneducated or naïve; it is also found in people who have high levels of education and who are otherwise critical thinkers. And yet on certain subjects their objectivity goes out the window, and they dig in their heels and won't budge.

I daresay most of us don't like this trait in others. We find it frustrating, and we try to avoid conversations (or at least certain topics of conversation) with people who are like this. But we're going to find out today that this trait can do more than merely spoil conversations. It can actually *damn* a person's soul forever—it can be the reason that someone goes to hell.

We are in a study of Matthew's Gospel, which we have broadly titled, “The Upside-Down Kingdom.” That's because Jesus' life and ministry did not conform to the messianic profile of the Jews in the first century—how He was born, where He grew up, who He hung out with, who He chose for His disciples, what He said about the kingdom of God, His relationship with religious leaders, even the doubts of His cousin and forerunner, John-the-Baptist.

The result of these unexpected features about Jesus and His ministry was that many Jews did not believe He was the anticipated Messiah. One of His disciples, John, said it this way: *“He came to His own, but His own received Him not...” (John 1:11)*. The most blatant example of those who did not receive Him was the Pharisees—the highly educated, conservative faction of Judaism who were fastidious in their study of Scripture and their observance of the law. Because Jesus didn't correspond to their precise theological interpretations or fit into their carefully constructed theological box, they viewed Him as an imposter. And because Jesus kept challenging their interpretations and opinions, their hostility toward Him intensified, so that anything and everything Jesus said and did were viewed as sinister. Even the undeniably good things.

Consider the event that is recorded in **Matthew 12:22-23**. ²² *Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to Him, and He healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.* ²³ *And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?”* ²⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”*

Matthew previously recorded an incident where Jesus exorcised a demon that had caused muteness in a man (9:32-33). Here the demon or demons caused a man to be *both* mute and blind. Demons are fallen angels—angels that rebelled with Satan and are under the command of Satan. Satan and his demons are the enemies of God and are in opposition to all that God is and does and stands for. Therefore, they are out to cause as much destruction as they possibly can to that which is precious to God, and they will exploit whatever vulnerabilities they can in order to do this, including hijacking a human being's mental or physical faculties. In this case, they caused a man to be both mute and blind.

There is no indication from the text as to when or how or why this happened to this man. Nor are we told how Jesus performed the healing—whether by laying on hands, or with a word, or in some other way. Matthew focuses on the fact that he was completely

cured (for he immediately spoke and saw) and the responses that the healing precipitated.

We are told in verse 23 that the people who saw this miracle were amazed...naturally. There are few things more dramatic than witnessing a miracle of this kind, especially one that involves a direct encounter with spiritual forces of evil. However, the wording in the Greek suggests that they weren't quite sure how to interpret it. The second part of verse 23 might be better translated, *This man isn't the Son of David, is He?* The question is worded in such a way as to indicate a measure of *perplexity*, but also to open the door to *possibility* (Morris). Jesus was so unlike what they expected Messiah to be, but the power he just demonstrated was undeniable, prompting them to wonder if he really was the Son of David—a common Jewish reference to the Messiah.

But the Pharisees' response in verse 24 indicates that they had already made up their minds about Jesus. ***24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."***

The miracle that Jesus performed was undeniable. The Pharisees heard the formerly mute man speaking, and saw that though he was also blind, he could now see. But instead of being amazed, instead of praising God for the demonstration of His power and mercy, instead of being happy for the man who was healed who was obviously elated by what had happened, they were immediately dismissive when they heard people asking if Jesus could be the Son of David.

They asserted that the only way Jesus could cast out demons was with the help of *Beelzebul*. *Beelzebub* was originally the name of a centuries old Canaanite deity (literally "lord of the flies") that the Hebrews contemptuously changed to *Beelzebul*, which means, "lord of dung." By the first century, however, the name had come to refer to the captain of the demons, otherwise known as Satan. So, to associate Jesus with this name, to accuse Jesus of having an alliance with Beelzebul, was to insult him in the most egregious way possible.

It was also an accusation based on a very flimsy rationale, which Jesus points out beginning in **verse 25**. ***25 Knowing their thoughts, He said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand."***

Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusation by testing their theory with simple deductive reasoning. He starts with the general proposition that a divided group, be it a kingdom or a city or a family, is doomed to fail. If a kingdom is divided it cannot achieve its goals. It cannot even defend itself from its enemies, because the factions within that kingdom redirect their focus and efforts and energy toward one another. The result is that the kingdom is sure to be defeated and will eventually disappear altogether.

The same is true for smaller groups, like cities or families. Factional strife and division will always prevent the group from standing firm and holding its ground, whatever the ground may be. This is simple logic, and Jesus is suggesting that the Pharisees are naive if they think that Satan is not aware of it (Morris).

He goes on to say, **verse 26**, ***26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?*** Jesus asks the Pharisees to consider the absurd logic of their argument. Why would Satan cast out his own demons? He would be undermining his own work. He would be defeating his own purposes. He would be releasing people from his own power and diminishing his influence in their lives. It would be counterproductive for Satan to cast out demons.

For the Pharisees to accuse Satan of casting out demons is to accuse him of being stupid, which he is not. Satan didn't attain his position of power and influence by being stupid. And if Jesus were actually working for Satan, why would Satan assign Jesus to attack, humiliate, and expel his own demons? It doesn't make a bit of sense.

But Jesus punches another hole in their argument in **verse 27**. *27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges.*

Jesus was not the only exorcist in Palestine at this time. Other Jews, pupils of the Pharisees in fact, cast out demons as well. In their haste to accuse Jesus of working for the devil, they had not considered that they were also implying that these other exorcists, their pupils, were working for the devil as well.

Of course, the Pharisees would have vehemently denied that their "sons" (a synonym for "pupils") were in league with the evil one, but their accusations of Jesus condemned them as well. That's why Jesus says, "Therefore *they will be your judges*; your own sons will prove you wrong!" Their sons will testify that casting out demons couldn't possibly be a work of Satan, and they will "judge" them for ascribing to Satan what really came from God (Morris).

So, Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to be consistent in their logic. If they believed that their pupils cast out demons by the power of God, then they must make the same conclusion about Jesus.

Jesus goes on in **28**. *28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

Nobody disputed the fact that Jesus actually cast out demons. The results were undeniable. The question was the *source* of his power. Jesus argued convincingly in verses 25-27 that it is foolish and naïve to think that he cast out demons by the power of Satan. But here He asks His audience to consider the implications of His actions if, in fact, His power comes from the Spirit of God. He asserts that it means nothing less than that the kingdom of God has arrived.

Remember, Jesus is speaking to an audience that had a very specific concept of what the kingdom of God would look like when it came. It would be a visible, political kingdom, like David's kingdom, only far more powerful and glorious and influential. But Jesus introduces something about the kingdom that most Jews had not seriously considered. God's primary enemy (and, therefore, Israel's primary enemy) was not Rome or any other worldly kingdom. It was Satan and his kingdom. Satan, we are told in Scripture, is "the god of this world" or "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). And so, in order for God's kingdom to be established Satan must first be defeated.

Jesus' authority over demons, demonstrated by his ability to cast them out, is a signal that the kingdom has now come. It is here right now, Jesus says, even though you cannot see any political structures. There is something going on in the unseen world, the spiritual realm, that is establishing God's dominion here on earth, and it is happening even as we speak.

There is a theological term for this. It is called *realized eschatology*. Realized eschatology doesn't mean that there won't be a visible, political kingdom in the future; it just means that the kingdom is here now. Jesus will have much more to say about this in chapter 13. But, suffice it to say, verse 28 may be the most direct teaching of Jesus on realized

eschatology, because He clearly says that if He is defeating the demons, then the kingdom has, indeed, come.

And Jesus reinforces this premise with an illustration in **verse 29**. ***29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.***

Jesus illustrates why He has authority over Satan and his demons with an analogy. One cannot attack a well-protected home without first rendering the guard powerless. The way to do that is to tie him up so that he cannot defend his territory. Once the guard is tied up, the robber is free to take whatever he wants.

When it comes to the spiritual realm, Jesus must first bind Satan before he can plunder his house. The exorcisms demonstrate that God in Christ is decisively defeating the devil. "As has often been noted, D-Day has come, though not yet V-Day. Satan is in his death throes. His last flurry of activity, to change the metaphor, is like that of a chicken (or perhaps better a snake!) with its head cut off" (Blomberg, *NAC*).

By the way, please consider that the mortal wound that Jesus has inflicted and will inflict on Satan (through His death on the cross) is far more consequential than healing a man of muteness and blindness. His decisive, single-handed victory over Satan required incredible power! And that ought to be the most astonishing thing of all.

Jesus goes on to point out that His struggle with a spiritual enemy, Satan, actually has implications for every human being. He says in **verse 30**, ***30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.***

This is an extremely important statement, so please listen carefully. Jesus says that every person is either for or against Jesus. No one is neutral. He is the dividing line of humanity, and what a person thinks of Him and does with Him is the most consequential thing about him/her. But Jesus implies in verse 30 that one has to choose Him to be on His side. Not to choose Him, to be non-committal about him, not to give Him any thought at all, is to actually be *against* Him—to be on the other side, Satan's side.

In our democratic society we think that there are three choices when you vote. You can vote yay, or nay, or you can abstain. And we think that abstaining means that you are not culpable for the outcome. That's not true when it comes to Jesus. A non-vote is a vote against him, and the person who abstains will actually have the same eternal destiny as those who are hostile toward Jesus.

The same point is made with gathering and scattering, an image that is taken from tending flocks. Animals tend to scatter, and if a person takes no part in gathering the scattered members, he in effect scatters them; by doing nothing he casts his vote in favor of scattering (Morris).

Again, it is impossible to be neutral in relation to Jesus. We are either for Him or against Him. Now, hear where Jesus is going with this, **verse 31**: ***31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.***

When Jesus says that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, He does not mean that these sins and blasphemy are not serious. He is saying that they will be forgiven in the normal way of forgiveness when the sinner repents and seeks God's forgiveness. Sins of this kind are serious; if they are *not* repented of and forgiven and will have eternal consequences. But they are forgivable.

But Jesus contrasts this with another sin he calls *blasphemy against the Spirit*, a sin that will not be forgiven. And if this is, indeed, the unpardonable sin, then we must make sure we understand just exactly what it means. Let me read **verse 32**, which sheds more light on the meaning. ***32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.***

Blasphemy, in its broadest sense, is demeaning, dishonoring, or insulting God, and the people in Jesus' day understood that were many ways that one could commit this offense, and that it was a serious sin that was punishable by death. But when Jesus refers to blasphemy against the Spirit in verse 31 and calls it the unpardonable sin, He has a specific offense in mind. And He clarifies the meaning of this sin in verse 32, for He equates "blasphemy against the Spirit" in verse 31 with "speaking against the Holy Spirit" in verse 32.

By the way, speaking against the Son of Man, Jesus, is also blasphemy, since He also is God, just as the Holy Spirit is God. But speaking against Jesus, the Son of Man, is not unforgiveable. People may insult Him, take His name in vain, call Him a fraud or worse, and oppose Him at some point in their lives. But if they become aware of what they've done, and they repent and ask forgiveness, God *does* forgive. It's a serious sin, but it is not unforgiveable, and there are numerous examples of this in the New Testament, including Saul, who later became Paul.

So, what is different about blaspheming the Holy Spirit? The answer is found in the context of what just happened in this story that gave rise to Jesus' comment. The Pharisees did not merely misunderstand Jesus, and they were not merely opposed to Jesus because He didn't conform to their messianic profile. They were downright hostile toward Jesus—so hostile that they interpreted everything He did as evil, even though they were undeniably *good*.

This is the third time in Matthew's Gospel that the Pharisees identified Jesus with Beelzebul. Attributing the works of Jesus to the work of Satan was a pattern for them. So while it may seem that their reaction to the particular miracle in this passage was thoughtless and rash, it wasn't. This is what they really believed. This is how they had made up their minds to interpret Jesus and the things He did—all the things. Jesus was in league with Satan, they thought, and therefore the works that the Spirit of God was doing through Jesus were actually Satan's work.

Remember I spoke earlier about people whose minds are so made up that even when they are presented with solid evidence that contradicts or disproves their opinion, they still refuse to change their minds? Remember I told you that this closed-mindedness, this stubborn resistance, this willful rejection of the truth can actually damn a person's soul forever?

This is what I was talking about. This *is* the unforgiveable sin. And why is it unforgiveable? Because this kind of hostility puts people in a state of heart and mind that prevents forgiveness. It's not that God refuses to forgive; it is that the person who sees good as evil and evil as good and cannot be convinced otherwise doesn't see the need to repent and come humbly to God for forgiveness. And there is no way to be forgiven other than by the path of repentance and faith.

New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, writes, "[The Pharisees] called good evil. People in such a situation cannot repent and seek forgiveness: they lack a sense of sin; they reject

God's competence to declare what is right. It is this continuing attitude that is the ultimate sin" (Morris).

To deny that God was at work in the miracle that had just amazed the crowds was inexcusable. That good work, according to Jesus, was evidence that the kingdom of God had arrived. The Pharisees rejected this, and thus rejected the kingdom, which means they rejected God's authority, God's plan, and God's provision for their salvation. And that persistent rejection is damning.

Not only will such people not be forgiven in this age, but also in the age to come. In other words, there is no hope for forgiveness after death. The intended meaning is something like "neither in time nor eternity; never!" The blasphemy against the Spirit has eternal as well as temporal consequences. Those who commit this sin cut themselves off from forgiveness here and now and from forgiveness in eternity (Morris).

I hope I have explained this clearly. I am frequently asked about the unpardonable sin, primarily because people are afraid they may have unwittingly committed it. But I want to underscore that the people who are in danger of committing this sin are Jesus' enemies—those who have never professed any allegiance to him and continue to reject him throughout their lives. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is nothing more or less than the unrelenting rejection of his advances (Morris).

What about you? Who do you think Jesus is? Have you made the choice to be for him?

“Damning Opinions” Matthew 12:22-32

Main Idea: Those who stubbornly reject Jesus’ identity and ministry are blaspheming the Holy Spirit, which is the one sin that will not ever be forgiven

The Miracle of Healing (22)
A demonized man

Blind and mute

The Reaction to the Miracle (23-24)
The crowds’ amazement and conclusion (23)

The Pharisees’ skepticism and conclusion (24)

Jesus Points Out the Pharisees’ Faulty Logic (25-28)
Divided kingdoms do not survive (25)

Satan does not attack his own (26)

Others, besides Jesus, are exorcising demons (27)

Authority over demons is evidence of the arrival of God’s kingdom (28)

Jesus Explains the Logic of His Exorcisms (29)

Jesus’ Warning about Stubborn Unbelief (30-32)
One is either for or against Jesus (30)

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin (31-32)
What does blasphemy against the HS mean?

Why is blasphemy against the HS unforgiveable?

What is the consequence?