

THE UNDIVIDED KINGDOM

Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. And all the crowds were astounded, and were saying, “Can this man really be the Son of David?” But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “This man does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” And knowing their thoughts He said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. “And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? “And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges. “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. “Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. “And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12:22–32 LSB)

We begin with an event that is becoming somewhat common; a man is brought to Jesus for healing. Specifically, this man is demon-possessed, and as a result is both blind and mute. Jesus healed him, casting out the demon, so that the mute man spoke and saw. This healing, beyond any doubt, continues to reveal the kindness of Jesus, the mercy of God, and the nature of the Kingdom of God. God’s Kingdom is not about oppression, restriction, domination, imprisonment, or suffering. It is, as Romans 14:17 says, righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit.

THE CROWD

Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw. And all the crowds were astounded, and were saying, “Can this man really be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:22–23)

LSB)

The crowd that witnessed this healing was amazed, confused, barely able to grasp what had happened. The word carries the sense of being displaced, so we could say that their minds were blown. Jesus performed many miracles and healings, but the people never become accustomed to them. The true works of God always astound people. The crowd then began to wonder, “Could this be the Son of David?” Well, yes, actually; not only *could* Jesus be the Son of David, He actually *is* the Son of David. He is the promised Messiah, the King who would reign eternally on David’s throne. He would be the unique agent of God in bringing the rule of God to earth.

The popular belief was that the Son of David would be a political, military leader; Jesus cared nothing for such leadership. But He did fulfill the promises of God regarding the throne. For example, Jeremiah 23:5 says,

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and prosper and do justice and righteousness in the land. (Jeremiah 23:5, LSB)

This is exactly what they saw Jesus do: He exercised kingly authority, casting out a spiritual terrorist (the demon), healing the effect of that foul creature, and doing justice and righteousness regarding this man’s suffering.

THE PHARISEES

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “This man does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” (Matthew 12:24 LSB)

When the Pharisees heard what that the people were wondering whether Jesus was the Son of David, they reacted very strongly by accusing Him of casting out demons by the power of the prince of Demons, Beelzebul; Satan, in other words.

I'm going to address their accusation, but first I want to emphasize what a hard-hearted, cold, mean-spirited group of men the Pharisees were. This poor man had not only been demon-possessed – which is awful enough – but had been stricken blind and mute by the demon. A similar healing in Mark 9 connects *muteness* with *deafness*. If that was the case here, then this man was utterly trapped within himself, unable to see, hear, or speak. His healing should have been celebrated!

Instead, the Pharisees insult the Son of God who performed this healing, blaspheme the Spirit of God by whom the demon was cast out, and demean this poor man's suffering.

No wonder Jesus calls the Pharisees

- a brood of vipers (Matthew 12:34)
- an evil and adulterous generation (Matthew 12:39)
- transgressors of the commandment (Matthew 15:3)
- hypocrites (Matthew 15:7)
- blind guides of the blind (Matthew 15:14)
- hard-hearted (Matthew 19:9)
- sons of hell (Matthew 23:15)
- fools and blind men (Matthew 23:17)
- whitewashed tombs full of dead mens' bones (Matthew 23:27)

- and serpents (Matthew 23:33).

THE ACCUSATION

Let's consider the accusation the Pharisees made about Jesus:

“This man does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.”
(Matthew 12:24 LSB)

If you have a King James or New King James Bible, you'll notice that the word is “Beelzebub” rather than “Beelzebul.” It's a minor spelling issue, and both names are actually accurate. Beelzebul means, as it says here, “prince of demons.” Beelzebul was a Canaanite deity worshiped in the city of Ekron. The term eventually came to be used of Satan himself as the prince of demons and lord of death.

Jesus, the Pharisees say, is not the Son of David, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, but the very opposite: his power is the power of Satan.

As we know from the Gospels, what mattered most to the Pharisees was their tradition. As long as the Scriptures seemed to support their tradition, they happily quoted it. When the Scripture went against their tradition, they easily found ways around it, and reinterpreted the Bible to suit their own views.

Their condemnation of Jesus' work revealed their own deep spiritual blindness. “You search the Scriptures,” Jesus said to the Pharisees, “because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is [the Scriptures you search] that bear witness about Me; and [yet] you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” (John

5:39–40 LSB)

JESUS ANSWERS

And knowing their thoughts He said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” (Matthew 12:25–30 LSB)

We see that Jesus knows their thoughts. That must have always been a shock; we think that our thoughts are our business alone. But God doesn’t respect our privacy; He knows our thoughts, and Jesus knew exactly what these men were thinking. He is the Son of David, the wise and powerful King who knows every last corner of His Kingdom in intimate detail. Nothing escapes His notice.

Listen to Him dismiss their accusation in four points.

First, their accusation simply makes no sense. No kingdom, or city, or even a household, can survive internal conflict for very long. Instead it will collapse, and be laid waste. Satan’s kingdom has stood for millennia, ever since he was cast out of heaven. It shows no sign of collapsing under its own weight. It would be great if it did, wouldn’t it? If only Satan were foolish enough to battle himself, his kingdom would have failed long ago. But it hasn’t; it remains tragically active and is stronger than any human opposition.

That leads to the second point.

The sons of the Pharisees cast out demons. Jesus isn't speaking about the physical sons of the Pharisees, but of their disciples, Pharisees-in-training, as it were. They themselves attempt to rescue people from the clutches of the devil. The fact that the disciples of the Pharisees attempt to cast out demons is proof that the Pharisees saw Satan as real, his kingdom as real and powerful, and his power over human beings as tragically strong. People get over all sorts of diseases, but no one gets over demon possession; they must be delivered, and the Pharisees knew it. As a result, the Pharisees' own actions toward demons stood in judgment against them.

But there is a third point that outweighs the first two.

Jesus truly casts out demons because the Kingdom of God has come. Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan (First John 3:8). That means delivering people from sin, death, and satanic domination. Jesus cast demons out of many people, and He cast many demons out of some people. This was the Kingdom of God against the kingdom of Satan, the Kingdom of heaven against the domain of darkness. Aside from God's Kingdom, Satan's kingdom is the oldest kingdom in creation. Thousands of human kingdoms have come and gone since Adam's fall, but Satan's continues on. It continues to stand, not because the devil represents any sort of challenge to God's power and authority, but because Satan is used by God for the Lord's own purposes. We see one of those purposes in this passage today; the fact that Jesus casts out Satan by the power of God is proof that the Kingdom of God has come. The foul blasphemy of the Pharisees was only proof of the power of Satan to control and confuse human beings. The power of Jesus to deliver men, women, and children from demonic possession – to deliver them without even

breaking a sweat – should be a cause for celebration.

But there is a fourth and final point that Jesus makes.

God's Kingdom is a spiritual Kingdom. It is not an earthly kingdom, with a physical territory gained through wars, maintained through politics and economics. The territory of the Kingdom is not land or money or power, but the souls of God's redeemed. From Adam and Eve on, God has been rescuing sinners from His own judgment, delivering them out of the domain of darkness and into the Kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Satan's insurrection against God's rule had been raging since his fall. When Jesus arrived on earth, that war came out into the open. Men and women could see the effect of enemy forces – demons – on human beings. They could watch as the Captain of the Host of the Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the Son of David, delivered those whom Satan had taken captive. Jesus bound "the strong man" – Satan – and "carried off his property" – people he had taken captive to do his will. We see it specifically in the life of this man, and one day we will see it universally, when Satan is bound, and ultimately cast into the lake of fire. God is going to deliver His people and establish His Kingdom, and Satan is utterly powerless to prevent it.

But Jesus has more to say. The Pharisees as a group have crossed a permanent line; a few, as we know, eventually believed in Jesus. But most took a formal stand against Him.

A SERIOUS WARNING

He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.

“Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. “And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12:30–32 LSB)

In making this accusation the Pharisees have clearly chosen sides. Satan is waging war on the Kingdom of God. The Son of God came to destroy the works of Satan and free those taken captive by him. The Pharisees have now formally sided with the devil by opposing the Son of God.

There is no such thing as spiritual neutrality. Whoever is not with Jesus is against Him; he who does not gather with Jesus scatters. Quite often those who claim to be neutral eventually show themselves to be enemies of the Son of God and His Kingdom. There are many ways to oppose Him; the worst is to accuse Him of exercising demonic power. That accusation is, Jesus says, unforgivable.

Some think that the unforgivable sin can't be committed today, because Jesus is no longer personally, physically working on earth. I understand that position; I held it for a long time. But my thinking is changing. Jesus is no longer physically at work on earth, but the Spirit of God is very much at work here. It is still possible to blaspheme the Holy Spirit by attributing His life-changing, saving, sanctifying work to the devil rather than to God. The Father elects sinners. The Son gave His life to atone for their sins and grant them righteousness. The Holy Spirit is the One who actually enters in to a sinner's heart, softening them, giving them faith, remitting their sins, making them spiritually alive, imputing Christ's righteousness, granting repentance and forgiveness. To say that these are Satanic works is unforgivable. To say that the process by which the Spirit transforms someone is evil is, itself, the worst sort of evil.

BRINGING IT HOME

This is what the prophet Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations about his own sin and the mercy of God:

Remember my affliction and my homelessness, the wormwood and gall. Surely my soul remembers **[when I was lost in sin]** and is bowed down within me. **[But]** this I will return to my heart, and therefore I will wait in hope: the lovingkindnesses of Yahweh indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness! “Yahweh is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I wait for Him.”

A spiritual battle rages around us. The devil is trying to keep his prisoners tight behind the bars of sin and death. The Spirit of God is carefully, perfectly freeing those whom the Father has chosen, and for whom the Son gave His life.

Every one of us has affliction and homelessness and wormwood and gall to remember; we can't help but remember them. The devil will never take back a single soul for whom Jesus died. He has lost them forever. But he works overtime to remind us of our sins and failures and weaknesses. He is the accuser; the name, Satan, means accuser.

But every Christian can also remind themselves of this every single day: the lovingkindnesses of Yahweh NEVER cease, because His compassions never fail. In fact, they are new every morning when we awake. Great, indeed, is the faithfulness of our God! Those whom the Son sets free are free indeed.