

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MATTHEW 12:22-37

IN this study we shall consider the second movement in the opposition of the rulers. We have already seen how the answers of Jesus to the different positions of the attack of the rulers varied; indeed there was a progress in His method.

In the first, when their complaint was concerning His claim in respect of the Sabbath, Jesus stood on the defensive.

In the second of these movements, the one which we are now to examine, He defended Himself against the charge they made, but He added to the defense words terrifically solemn as He warned these men concerning the peril which threatened them.

In the last movement, which we have yet to consider, He denounced and condemned, refusing absolutely to give them evidence when they asked for it.

Let us first break up the section which we are to study into its component parts, and then consider them. In verses twenty-two and twenty-three we have the occasion of this outbreak of conflict.

“Then was brought unto Him one possessed with a devil, blind and dumb: and He healed him, insomuch that the dumb man spake and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed, and said, Is not this the Son of David?”

Then in verse twenty-four, brief and yet forceful, we have the account of the attack which the rulers made on Him, in the presence of this miracle which He had performed in their sight, and in the sight of the people. All the remaining part of the paragraph is devoted to Christ's answer to the attack. Let us look, then, first, at the occasion; secondly, at the attack; and principally and particularly, at Christ's answer.

The occasion was that of the healing of a demoniac. A man possessed with a demon was brought to Him, a man in whose physical life the demon had wrought sad havoc, a man who was both blind and dumb; and with a word of power, with no incantations, with none of the methods of the exorcists of that particular time, the man was healed; and the fact that the demon had been exorcised was made evident by the man seeing and speaking.

It was one of the wonders that Jesus wrought habitually.

The effect produced by this particular miracle upon the crowd reveals the real meaning of the Pharisees' complaint and attack. When the crowds saw what Jesus did with this man, they are reported to have exclaimed, "**Is not this the Son of David?**"

It was the question of the perplexed crowd. They had been watching Him, and listening to Him, and beholding the wonders that He wrought, and at last in the presence of this wonderful miracle, wrought with absolute ease, simply by the uttering of a word, they cried out in perplexity, "**Is not this the Son of David?**" They meant to say, We cannot make up our minds. To insert a phrase for the sake of exposition it was as though they had said, "Is this, after all, the Son of David?"

When we hear the question, and see what it indicated, we know why the Pharisees said what they did. It was a perpetual fear among the Pharisees and rulers that they might lose their hold on the people. Upon occasion they said, "**What do we? . . . all men will believe on Him.**"

They saw very clearly that if His line of teaching was accepted, their power would be absolutely gone; and when they heard this wavering, hesitating question, "**Is not this the Son of David?**" they attempted to account for the wonder that had produced the question by this declaration: "**This fellow doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub the prince of the demons.**"

What they said was either a lie and they knew it; or else it was the result of their degenerate moral nature, so that they were unable to distinguish between good and bad, between heaven and hell, between purity and pollution. Whichever alternative is chosen, this at least remains true, they were attempting to turn the people from the Christ, by attributing the wonders that He wrought to diabolic influence.

The King's answer proceeded along two lines.

- First, that of refutation;
- Secondly, that of declaration.

He refuted their argument by appeal to logic.

This was one of the rare occasions when Jesus by argument answered attacks upon Himself. As a rule, a man who criticized Him He let severely alone, or replied to his question briefly and finally. It would be a very profitable and interesting study to take the Gospels and collect the questions men asked, and the answers He gave.

The wonder of the answers of Jesus is revealed in the fact that we hardly ever find that men asked Him two questions consecutively; and now, nineteen centuries later, no man can improve on any answer Jesus gave as to the philosophy revealed, the method adopted, or the purpose gained.

But here, so terrible was the thing the rulers had said that Jesus, first of all, refuted by argument what they said.

The charge made against Him was that He wrought His wonders by complicity with evil; that by Beelzebub, Satan, He cast Satan out. In His refutation, our Lord attacked and denied their suggestion; and then proceeded to state and defend the truth concerning His method; He affirmed that He wrought by the Spirit, and defended His affirmation.

He revealed in His answer:

- First, the folly of their suggestion;
- Secondly, the inconsistency thereof;
- Thirdly, the willful rebellion that induced it;
- Fourthly, the blindness which caused it;
- Finally, their complicity with Satan as the secret of it.

So that commencing by denying His own complicity with Satan logically, and in such a way that they could not reply, He ended by inferentially charging upon them complicity with Satan.

Let us trace these movements one by one.

First He showed the folly of their suggestion in a simple and logical statement. He told them that by common knowledge a house divided against itself cannot stand, a **“Kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation.”** Therefore if He in complicity with Satan were casting Satan out, then Satan was working for his own destruction.

He next revealed the inconsistency of their position, as He said, **“If I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges.”**

There was abundant evidence that there were exorcists abroad, men who in one way or another, were casting our evil spirits. Christ did not defend them or attack them, but simply referred to them in His argument with their fathers, the rulers of the people.

Mark the final words of the argument, **“But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.”**

There was but one alternative to their suggestion; if not by Satan, then by the Spirit of God is Satan cast out; and in such action men were brought face to face with the Kingdom of God, not only as to its claim, but as to its power.

In a moment the deeper truth began to burn and flame before the eyes of these men as to Christ's intention. Not only was their charge false and inconsistent; it was of the nature of rebellion against the Kingdom of God. It was because they were living in rebellion against the Kingdom that they had attempted to attack Him.

Now follow a step further.

He now took for granted that complicity with Beelzebub on His part could no longer be maintained; and that His claim that He cast out devils by the Spirit must be conceded. Taking these things for granted, mark the progress of His argument: **“Or else how can one enter into a strong man’s house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man?”**

In effect He thus said to them; “You charge Me with casting out demons by the prince of demons; have you not eyes with which to see that when I cast out demons it is a proof that I have already laid My conquering hand upon the master of demons; that instead of working by his power I am working as the result of having overcome his power; that I have entered into the house of the strong man and bound him, and therefore am able to spoil his house?”

The binding of the strong one was wrought out by the perfection of the Christ. Not merely by virtue of the death of Jesus, but by the virtue of His pure humanity did He bind the strong one, and so was able to spoil his house. As Man He overcame the enemy in personal temptation, bound him, and thereby made Himself able to spoil his house. God’s children who have entered into His victory by the Cross, also know something of what it is to bind the strong one. His Cross is the force that sets us free to spoil the house of the strong one, and rescue other souls.

He said one other thing by way of refutation,

“He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.”

That was a statement containing principles of perpetual application. Carefully note its setting. **“He”** refers first to Satan, and in that verse, flaming with light, the two great personalities are brought into contact, the One the Gatherer, and the other the scatterer; and they are forever against each other. The truth about Satan is not that the King was in complicity with him. The truth is that He was in antagonism to everything he did. He had cast the demon out of a man, and so had gathered him back into unified and balanced life; had gathered him back to His family, and to the family of God. It was Satan that had scattered, it was he that had spoiled.

Thus as the King commenced by showing the folly of saying that Satan was working with Him, He ended His refutation by declaring the absolute antagonism between them; He was the Gatherer; Satan was the scatterer. There are but two forces at work, the force that gathers and the force that scatters.

And Jesus said in effect; Do not confuse the Person Who stands at the center of the gathering force with the person who stands at the center of the scattering force. A distinction must be maintained between good and evil in all logical thinking.

But the **“he”** of our Lord’s statement has also personal application to every life. It is as though Jesus had said to these men, all life is centripetal or centrifugal. I am gathering. What are you doing? He meant to say that they were scattering; that it was not He Who was with Satan, but they.

Thus by one sweeping statement, true as God is true and every man knows it is true in his deepest heart - that the Gatherer is against the scatterer, Jesus marked a clear line, dividing all He does from all the devil does, and that line is His dividing line between men. That line is the Judgment Throne. We are with Him or against Him; and we may know which by asking, Are we gathering or are we scattering?

We now reach those awe-inspiring words with which the paragraph closes. For searching solemnity they are unsurpassed in the records of the things Jesus said. We tremble as we read them. Jesus Christ opens here before the mind a sphere into which if a man ever enter, his case is absolutely hopeless.

The One Who proclaimed, as the supreme meaning of His mission, that He had come to seek and to save the lost; the One Who declared that He was able and willing to save and remake men and women whom others had cast out as hopeless, is the One Who here declared that there is an attitude of the human soul which is hopeless.

Such solemn words as these demand our careful attention for two reasons:

- First, in order that we may place no untrue emphasis on them;
- Secondly, that we may by no means minimize their terrible meaning.

We are in danger of making both these mistakes. We may read into them meanings which He never intended; or we explain away the most solemn words Jesus Christ ever uttered. The only way in which we can hope to understand, is by taking them in the simplest way possible.

The whole statement falls into three parts:

- The first is a solemn warning.
- The second is the chronicle of the appeal He made to His traducers.
- Then, finally, we have what seem to be the most awful words of all, because in them it would appear as though Jesus Christ Himself had become almost hopeless of the men to whom He spoke.

First, the warning.

In order that there may be no undue emphasis put upon the solemn words, let us carefully observe that they constituted a warning, and not a sentence. We are not warranted in believing that the Pharisees had committed the unpardonable sin, but that they had come near to its committal; so near that presently, in the final lament, Jesus, usually so full of hope for men, in one brief, wailing complaint makes it evident that they had almost crossed the boundary line. But, at the moment when these words were uttered, they had not crossed that awful boundary line, and the words were for warning, and not for sentence.

Therefore we are not true to the context, when we say that the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is that of attributing to the Son of Man complicity with Satan. That is blasphemy against the Son of Man, and He distinctly said that such may be forgiven.

What, then, is the nature of the warning?

The Lord had said, **“If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you;”** and in those words He evidently intended to teach that there are only these alternatives; exorcism of demons is either by Satan or by the Spirit of God.

They said that He had wrought by Satan. In so doing they had denied that He wrought by the Spirit, which according to His interpretation meant that they were refusing the Kingdom of God.

In the presence of the claims of that Kingdom, in the presence of the demonstration of the power of that Kingdom, they were refusing it. That, if it be ultimately and finally persisted in, is the sin against the Holy Ghost which has no forgiveness. The sin against the Holy Ghost is the ultimate refusal to believe on the testimony of the Spirit concerning Jesus Christ. The sin against the Holy Ghost is persistent, determined, and final rejection of the Spirit’s demonstration of the meaning of the Kingdom, and of the power of the King.

In the final words of the King this statement is found; **“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.”**

Notice that principle. Speaking against the Holy Ghost does not consist in a theory advanced; nor in a sentence that drops thoughtlessly from the lips. When a man says I will not believe the testimony, he does so because in his heart he is refusing the King. That is the unpardonable sin. There is no sin under heaven that may not be put away by infinite mercy, through the Cross, except the sin which declines to receive the mercy, to receive the grace, because it declines to submit to the sceptre of the King.

These men were very near that sin. He declared that sin can be forgiven so far as it is a slight and insult to Him; but if men persist in refusal to obey, if they will have none of His grace, then they cannot be forgiven. The sin against the Holy Ghost is willful, personal, final rejection of the Spirit’s testimony, by words of the mouth which express the decision of the heart.

Then He made His appeal to them; **“Either make the tree good, and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt and its fruit corrupt.”**

Say that you know the tree is corrupt because its fruit is corrupt; or dare to say that the tree is good, because its fruit is good. There is in these words the touch of a great pity, of a great desire to help these men. He appealed to them not to attribute good fruit to a corrupt tree.

That is what they were doing. They said that the good result, of a man freed from demon possession, was wrought by Satan. He appealed to them to be consistent; to believe on Him for the very works’ sake.

Then finally He uttered the most awe-inspiring words of all; **“O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things?”**

The severity of that consists in His evident pity for them. It seems as if even the hopeful spirit of Christ was almost hopeless about these men. He said, How can ye speak a true thing? How can ye say the tree is good because its fruit is good? How can you tell the truth? You are the offspring of vipers; you are morally degenerate; you have lost your moral discrimination.

It is impossible to undertake a study like this, without feeling its searching force and power in one's own heart and life.

The power of Christ is as evident to-day as ever. The works that He is doing in our time are far more wonderful than the works that He did in the days of His flesh. There are multitudes of witnesses who can tell of moral change in their lives, that cannot be produced in any other way than by His power; men who were mean and dastardly, and to-day are victorious and noble. On every hand evidences of His power abound, as mighty, and mightier, than any wrought in the material realm. They are the moral victories of Jesus to-day.

J. Cotter Morrison, in his book, *The Service of Man*, in which he professes not to believe in Christ, says, "The Christian doctrine has the power of elevating and developing saintliness which has had no equal in any other creed or philosophy."

How do we account for that? The answer to this question will depend upon what we are in ourselves. If in our heart there is simple honesty, there is but one answer - He Who flings out impurity is pure; He Who saves man from the power of passion is in Himself a Master of the tides of passion; He Who lifts a man from degradation is Himself noble and honest. To see these present-day miracles in the realm of morals, is to be compelled, unless the heart be utterly depraved, to crown Him Lord of all, kiss His sceptre, and bow in reverential worship in the presence of His glory.

~ end of chapter 29 ~

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