

Pharisees' Accusations and Desire a Sign Matthew 12:22-45; Mark 3:22-30

In his book, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ J. Dwight Pentecost said concerning this event of Christ, “This incident, then, marked the great turning point in the life of Christ. From this point on to the cross, the nation is viewed in the Gospels as having rejected Christ as Messiah. The unofficial rejection by the leaders would become official when finalized at the cross.” p. 208

I. Setting This incident starts with a healing miracle and escalates into accusations from the Religious Leaders. Jesus will answer those charges and then give the Jews a very stern warning. Lastly, we find the Pharisees changing their talking point and asking for a sign. Luke 11 has a very similar event and following narrative, but most scholars feel these are two different incidents.

“Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb : and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw. ²³And all the people (Lit. - multitude) were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? (Gk - skeptical emotion/uncertain “This man isn’t the Son of David, is he?”)” **Matthew 12:22-23** I read several times how the onlookers to this healing would have counted it a very difficult case: one person had three needs, demon possession, blind, and dumb. They realized this was a fight against Satan and the ailments of the body and would account for the strong reaction of the multitude. The word “amazed” is very intense, we’ve seen it before in our study, and the crowd was beside themselves with excitement and wonder. But not only did it affect their emotions, it stimulated their thoughts as the statement, “This isn’t the Son of David, is he?” moved through the multitude. This is the first recorded time we see the people using the Messianic name for Jesus, “Son of David.” But, in Greek, this statement reeks of skepticism and uncertainty. They were starting from a heart of unbelief, not pure consideration of Jesus as their Messiah. What’s holding the people back from declaring Jesus their Messiah? He doesn’t look like the king and liberator they expected!

II. Religious Leaders’ Accusation and Jesus’ Answer

Accusation:

“But when the Pharisees heard it (“And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem” Mark 3:22), they said, (“He hath Beelzebub,” Mark 3:22) This fellow (notice the disrespect – not Master, Teacher, Rabbi, certainly not Messiah, Creator of the World) doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.” **Matthew 12:24**

Pharisees/scribes – Mark tells us about the scribes (scholars of the law – often called lawyers) who came from Jerusalem. There seemed to be an official delegation of religious VIPs come together to hear, observe, and evaluate Jesus. But they also were able to hear the people’s reaction to Christ, and that would have been the greatest of their concerns! We must know and understand the Jewish mindset at the time of Christ. The Religious Leaders were the conscience and teachers of the people. What they said held as much power with the people as the scrolls found in the Temple! The common Jew had their ears and eyes on the Religious Leaders for direction on how to evaluate Jesus. We will find that Religious Leaders will use their influence to steer the people away from Christ, the Savior of the world!

“Beelzebub the prince of the devils.” – This is a Jewish symbol of the Devil/Satan at the time of Christ. It would have got its origin from the Philistine deity Baal. The Pharisees and Scribes couldn’t deny the miracle as supernatural (honest-hearted Pharisee – Nicodemus, John 3:2) so they had to discredit it, and this accusation

couldn't be worse! Did you notice that Mark wrote the Religious Leaders said, "He hath Beelzebub?" They were spreading that Jesus was possessed by the Devil! Their explanation was that the Devil was working **in and through** Jesus and in Greek, the words, "they said," are in a repetitive tense. They told this lie over and over again to those multitudes watching and listening to Jesus! Matter of fact, this will be the public explanation of Jesus' miracle-working power going forward. John 7:20; 8:48-52; 10:19-21

- **Two-Fold Answer & Counter Charge:**

1. **Logically, Satan would not work against himself.**

And Jesus knew their thoughts, ("And he called them unto him," Mark 3:23) and said unto them, ("in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan?" Mark 3:23) Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation ("cannot stand." Mark 3:24); and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: ²⁶And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? ("but hath an end." Mark 3:26)" Matthew 12:25-26

"knew their thoughts"/"called them unto him" – Again, Jesus knew what the Religious Leaders were thinking and **He called them to come and face Him!**

"parables" – This is the first time we will see the book of Mark use the word parable. Let's define a parable. It is not an illustration, and it is more than "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." It is a story that compels the listener to get deeply involved and to direct them to make a personal decision about a truth of God in their life. They were so powerful, that several times the Religious Leaders wanted to kill Jesus after a parable! (Matt. 21:45-46)

"cannot stand"/"shall not stand" – Jesus will publicly refute their ridiculous accusation. They had no logic to their theory. A country in the middle of a civil war or a power struggle among authorities brings only unrest, confusion, and instability in that country. Even the very land can quickly become deserted, turn into a wilderness, and laid waste. Jesus was obviously stronger than Satan and Satan would never fight against himself.

"but hath an end" – Mark records this beautiful reminder of the Devil's final outcome! One day he will be defeated! Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 20:10

2. **Inconsistency of their Logic**

"And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? therefore they shall be your judges. ²⁸ But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. ²⁹ Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house. ³⁰ He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." Matthew 12:27-30

"by whom do your children cast them out? – We are getting a glimpse into a phenomenon most of us are not acquainted with – exorcism! There seems to have been this power given to men at the time of Christ. Here Jesus embarrasses the Religious Leaders with the fact that they have those among them who attribute this power to God but now they will not give the same privilege to Jesus! I love the line "they shall be your judges." The Pharisees could not have it both ways!

"then the kingdom of God is come unto you." – This is probably the most amazing statement of this passage! The fact was **that if Jesus** did cast out devils by the power of the Holy Spirit, then the kingdom of God

had come to them! His power was proof that He was the Messiah! Jesus is putting before His listeners a need to look at the facts and make a decision for Him! “I am here! My power to cast out demons is my credential!”

“he first bind the strong man?” – Here Jesus explains how He could cast out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. No robber can plunder a house until he first ties up the owner. This simple word picture tells exactly Jesus’ superior power over the devil! Jesus was not in league with Satan, He was in combat with Him and stronger!

“not with me is against me;”/“gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.” – Here is Jesus’ challenge! He is asking the multitudes which will you choose, against me, gather with me, or scatter aboard? In the conflict with Satan, **one cannot be neutral**. Either you will be with Christ or under the control of Satan. Many seemed to have already decided to scatter lies and hate about Jesus, how the people needed to decide for Christ; just like people need to choose Him today!

- **Counter Charge – Blasphemy Against the Spirit** Here we see a warning of Christ. It’s not necessarily a declaration of certain judgment, but a truth these men needed to understand!

“Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men (“and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme” Mark 3:28): but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men (“but is in danger of (Lit. - guilty/bound by) eternal damnation” Mark 3:29). ³²And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world (Lit. – age/eternity) to come.” Matthew 12:31-32 I want to start the discussion of this passage with a couple of quotes.

- JW Shepherd, in his book *The Christ of the Gospels*, said this about the Religious Leaders, “Their prejudices and self-interest had blinded them; they deliberately refused to be convinced; their consciences had been deadened and their hearts were not incapable of repentance. They willfully and deliberately showed enmity and antagonism toward Him, blaspheming God.” p. 216
- The Life Application Bible had this comment, “Whoever rejects the prompting of the Holy Spirit removes himself from the only force that can lead him to repentance and restoration to God.” p. 1586

God can and will forgive all sin – murder, all sexual sin, all cruelty, any evil you can name, but when someone rejects the prompting of the Holy Spirit and refuses to accept Jesus, there is no forgiveness. Now, we don’t know when people have rejected Christ for the last time. As long as a person is alive, they can come to Christ, but if they reject Him and die, their time of choice is over. All sin is forgivable, but if one rejects every attempt of the Holy Spirit to bring them to Christ, they are removing themselves from the only one who will draw them to Jesus! At this point, these Religious Leaders were rejecting and blaspheming the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ. I think the word “deliberately” is key. Deliberately, consciously, on purpose, thoughtfully, they were rejecting Christ, His signs, His offer of salvation! They were rejecting the grace of God! Occasionally, we hear of someone who refuses medical intervention for an illness, and sadly they die. This same illustration can be used here, a soul who refuses the Holy Spirit’s convincing of their need of Christ, is condemning themselves to hell for eternity!

“(“ Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.” Mark 3:30) ³³Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers (Lit. brood/offspring of poisonous snakes), how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance (Lit. – bubbles out/overflows) of the heart the mouth speaketh. ³⁵A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out

of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. ³⁶ But I say unto you, That every idle word (Lit. - trivial/causal/ worthless/not necessarily evil/useless) that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. ³⁷ For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” Matthew 12:33-37 We cannot forget what started this conversation and the warning from Jesus. Mark 3:30 reminds us, the Religious Leaders were saying Jesus was both possessed and working by the power of the devil. John MacArthur said, “There is no truer indication of a bad tree than the bad fruit of speech.” p. 164 Notice verse 37 again, words reveal who is justified – a believer/Christian and who is condemned – an unbeliever! Words reveal the heart and **the Pharisees’ words were like the venom of poisonous snakes.** Please realize, that this was very strong, negative language concerning the Pharisees spoken before a people that held their word in the highest regard!

Let’s talk for a minute about “idle words” and how we will “give account” of them. Every study Bible and scholar I read said these were not necessarily evil words, just mindless and causal; words we don’t even consider or take notice of! Wow! This verse was a favorite of my mother, and she would often use it on my siblings and me, especially in our teenage years! That really squashed foolish teenage conversation! But here Jesus tells us God takes notice of every word we say, - not only the good and the evil as Jesus has been highlighting saying they are a window to the heart! But God takes notice of even the words we say thoughtlessly. We will have to answer for them. This is a sobering thought! This was a lesson to the Religious Leaders that day, but it certainly is for us as well!

It is wonderful to remember not all Pharisees, chief priests, and Jewish leaders rejected Jesus. Perhaps even some of these men standing before Jesus that day would later bow to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Remember, we find reference to believing Religious Leaders throughout the book of Acts! Acts 15:5; 1 Tim. 1:12-14

Jesus’ arguments were unanswerable, so the Religious Leaders shifted to a new talking point – a sign!

III. Religious Leaders Ask for a Sign

“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master (Teacher), we would (wish to) see a sign from thee.” Matthew 12:38

“we would see a sign” – This makes me just shake my head with wonder! They wanted a sign, a miracle announcing the fact that Jesus was the Messiah! Now, let’s just review the facts and highlights of Jesus’ healing ministry up to this point: water to wine, nobleman’s son, Peter’s mother-in-law, lepers, man through the roof, centurion’s servant, widow of Nain’s son raised from the dead, and how about the man Jesus cast out a devil and healed his deaf and blindness! There were countless unnamed healings! The Old Testament said plainly the Messiah would do great miracles and signs. Isaiah 35:4-6. This was exactly what Christ was doing, giving them signs of who He was! Some recognized it and accepted Him (disciples), others were considering Him (Nicodemus), but most were rejecting Jesus because He didn’t look like what they expected in a Redeemer! And now, when Jesus made their claim of Him doing His work by the devil look foolish, they ask for a sign, a miracle! Do you think any sign would satisfy them enough to bow at His feet and confess Jesus as their Messiah? No! Their desire was control – controlling Jesus and demonstrating their controlling power before the people. A demand for a sign was another regular part of the attacks against Jesus. The Religious Leaders had asked for a sign several times before and will again! Here and in Luke 11, but also John 2:18; 4:48; 6:30; 20:30 (These are two before this incident and two after.); Matt. 16:1-4. 1 Cor. 1:22 – Needing a sign was a characteristic of the Jews.

- **Three-Fold Answer:**

“But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three

nights in the whale's belly (Gk. – great sea creature, huge fish) ; so shall (future) the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth .” Matthew 12:39-40

1. Your only sign Jesus had called the Religious Leaders the **children of poisonous snakes**, and now He calls all the Jews **adulterers**. This very ugly name is an Old Testament term often used against the children of Israel because of their idolatry and unfaithfulness to God! But now at the time of Christ, they were still unbelieving and idolaters! They were not involved in Baal worship, not sacrificing to a golden calf, not bowing to the gods of the Amorites, now they worshipped their “Jewish religion.”

Jesus refused to perform a miracle on command, to feed the Religious Leaders’ desire to control Him, instead, He told them the exact sign He would do in the future. Jesus told them what to watch for, the sign of Jonah – three days and three nights in the “heart of the earth.” This is not the first time Jesus spoke of His resurrection. See John 2:18-22 He will repeat this many times. Matt. 16:1-4 Do you think they knew what He was talking about? I don’t think so. But we will find Jesus becoming even more specific about His death and resurrection. Remember, whether here or elsewhere the Religious Leaders will be concerned about Jesus leaving the grave after three days! Matt. 27:62-66

Jesus will use two Gentile examples, one wicked city, and one woman ruler, to point out their hard heart of unbelief. This generation had the Messiah before them, yet they would not believe!

“The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here.”
Matthew 12:41-42

2. Your history lesson We have seen Jesus use Old Testament people and cities as illustrations. Here He will remind them of Jonah and Solomon, two great leaders of Israel, but then declare, “A greater is here!”

“Jonah” – Jonah preached repentance to Nineveh, though reluctantly, and saw the city repent. Nineveh, a city known for its savagery, believed in God but Israel will not! Jonah 3:4-10

“queen of the south” – Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived. The Queen of Sheba was willing to put herself in danger and traveled a long distance to hear and learn from him. We read in 1 Kings 10; that she went away believing in the God of Solomon. Yet, though Jesus came from heaven and taught the words of His Father, Israel would not hear and believe. 1 Kings 10:1-10

Though Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba were Gentiles, they believed, repented, and desired truth. This was lacking from this generation of Jews! They were truly idolaters; they loved their religion, served it, sacrificed for it, and worshipped it. Their temple, their laws, and their traditions were their god! They could and would not recognize the God of heaven when He stood before them!

I think we can call this a parable, but a strange one! The Jews believed demons roamed the wilderness, so this fit into their thinking. Jesus not only illustrated their wicked, empty hearts toward God at this time, but also told them of their coming difficulties.

“When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. ⁴⁴ Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. ⁴⁵ Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven (a general Jewish number) other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.” Matthew 12:43-45

3. Your evil hearts Jesus is comparing the nation of Israel to a person that was demon-processed! The Jews had left behind their worship of Baal, sacrificing their children to Moloch, and other terrible deeds of idol worship. They had been brought back to the worship of God and the re-establishment of temple worship by great men like Ezra and Nehemiah. Their “house” had been cleaned up! But Israel’s commitment to God didn’t last. The truth of Deut. 6:4-5 was not a fiber of most Jews by the time of Christ. “Here, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” Because they were not really placing God at the center of their worship, the devil was able to come in again and now they were self-deceived and blind to the fact that they were still idol worshippers, but this time serving a system and religion that only looked like the worship of God!

Jesus pointed out their condition that day, but it will also get worse in the future! And as we study the history of the Jewish people, we know how bad it has been for them. They have continued to reject God, continued in their religion, and have continued to suffer for it.

But God will be faithful to His promises. They are still His chosen people, and He still has promises to fulfill. It is wonderful to remember, that individual Jews are being saved today just as some recognized Christ as their Messiah during His lifetime on earth. But one day the whole nation will again worship Him in spirit and in truth! Rom. 11:25-27

Believers Application:

1. We must be very aware of our spiritual condition before God. The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts of our need for salvation. We must not reject as He communicates with us our need to become a Christian.

John 16:7-11; Matthew 7:13-27 I am afraid we sit in our good churches with many unbelievers around us who are unaware and unwilling to take a hard look at their soul and ask, “Am I really a Christian?” They may be our friends, our friends’ kids, our friends’ husbands, they could be Sunday School teachers, ushers, or even on the church board. They could have grown up in the church or walked in and enjoyed the atmosphere and friendships and never left. But their lives show very little passion for Christ, their words are shallow at best, but they are busy! Our churches preach the Word of God and explain salvation from the pulpit almost weekly, but very little seems to happen. I am fearful that the drawing of the Holy Spirit is being ignored.

What can we do?

- First of all, **be certain of your own salvation!** Don’t let pride or the Devil’s lies keep you from obeying His call. Talk to your pastor or a mature believer. Talk through your doubts and don’t stop seeking God until you are convinced of your home in heaven! A verse like John 1:18 needs to become a fiber of your soul. “But as many as receive him, to them gave he power to become of sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.”
- **Be very aware of a theme of Jesus’ teaching – Few find the narrow way/ Wolves and Vipers try to destroy.** Christ was very hard on the prideful, self-righteous religionist! He made it clear that man loves religion and doing and will even deceive themselves into thinking they are Jesus-followers, but one day Christ would have to tell them “I never knew you!” Matt. 7:13-23
 1. Never tell someone they are a Christian, especially a child. Let them tell you!
 2. Never act surprised or try and talk someone out of a desire to become a Christian. Encourage, celebrate, direct to the doctrine of salvation, and disciple them.
 3. Never take for granted everyone around you is a believer. Those in your church, in your home, in your extended family, or in your circle of friends.
 4. Never insist and lead someone in a prayer they don’t initiate. Be careful in your zeal to see souls saved, that you don’t intimidate someone into an outward decision when they have no inward

conviction! Don't start them on a path of false security, let the Holy Spirit do the work of drawing their heart!

5. Never stop seeking souls for Christ and stay in tune with what the Holy Spirit may be doing in the hearts of others. Remind people wise men still follow Jesus! Matt. 7:24-27

2. Who or what do you worship and serve? Is it God? Or is there something or someone else that you place above the God of heaven? Don't quickly dismiss these questions! The generation of Jews that knew Jesus, served, loved, and worshipped their religion. To place religion above God and His truth is a lie of the devil and a tendency of man! God and His Word must be our center. Be careful of religion.

Religion - man's attempt to get to God with "do good and be good" at its core. Often religion, denominations, conventions, and even formal associations, place fear, peer pressures, rituals, and rules, as central to their belief system. It's concerning when churches put much time into studying religious distinctives and less into studying the character of God, His plan of redemption, the work of Christ, and the believer's part in spreading the Gospel! Our personal study, and that of our churches should center on the Word of God. We should make sure Bible truths are held up as the most important, regardless of the name on the sign out front. Remember, Jesus spent much of His time debating, and opposing formal religion Remember, it was the leaders of a religious sect that ultimately put Him on the cross!

We do not have idols set up in our houses: neatly arranged shelves decorated with lights, flowers, and small carved figures. But in Ezekiel 14:3, 4, 7, we are told where the idols we worship and serve are found, our hearts!

Let's look at Jesus' words concerning what should be the center of our worship and service. We worship God and we serve Him and others by love!

"Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. ³⁸ This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Matthew 22:37-40

Nothing else will satisfy or complete us! No church, organization, or association can give us what Christ does – strength and guidance to live each day, and an eternal home in Heaven!

Ask the Lord to give you an honest heart to evaluate who or what you worship and serve. Seek to be a faithful follower of Jesus! Col. 2:6-10