

Chapter 44: Binding the Strong Man

Matthew 12:22–32

When Jesus healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, the conflict between him and Pharisees moved from general opposition to outright hostility. The Pharisees are not only plotting murder (Matt. 12:14), but they also begin an active campaign to turn the hearts and minds of the people against Jesus as well. When Jesus heals a demon-oppressed man who is blind and mute, though, the Pharisees recognize that their task will be very difficult. The people intuitively know by Jesus' miracles exactly who Jesus is and what he is doing. Namely, *Jesus is plundering Satan's house*.

Blaspheming the Son of Man (Matt. 12:22–27)

In the previous section, we read that Jesus had withdrawn from the Pharisees, but had continue healing those who followed him (Matt. 12:15). Now, we read about one of those healings: “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” (v. 22). The connection to v. 15 is likely since, as Morris notes, “It is unusual to have a demoniac described as healed...it is really the trigger for the discussion that follows.”¹

Specifically, when the people see Jesus healing this demon-oppressed man, they “were amazed, and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’” (v. 23). Matthew has kept portrayed Jesus as the “Son of David” since the very first book of this Gospel (Matt. 1:1). Then, two blind men called Jesus the “Son of David” (Matt. 9:27). Now, after Jesus heals the blind and mute man by casting out the demon, the rest of the people begin to raise the question of whether Jesus might be the Son of David. As we have talked about previously, this is an important title that recognizes Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah and the heir to the throne of David.

When the Pharisees heard the people asking whether Jesus could be the Son of David, they rebuked them: “But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (v. 24). In this, we should recognize that what the Pharisees say here reflects the difficulty of holding their position against Jesus: “Since the Pharisees cannot deny the powerful deeds of Jesus and since they cannot admit he performs them by the power of God (cf. v 28), their only apparent recourse is to attribute them to the power of the devil, being fully oblivious to the foolishness of such a conclusion.”² Before we examine how Jesus refutes their claims as illogical, France's observations are also worth considering: “We have therefore moved beyond ‘academic’ debate on the validity of Jesus' teaching and practice to the realm of personal abuse and character assassination. The accusation of complicity with the devil is not only extremely offensive,

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 313–14.

² Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 342.

but is intended to destroy Jesus' credibility in the eyes of a God-fearing public."³

Since Matthew tells us that Jesus knows the "thoughts" of the Pharisees (v. 25a), it is likely that the Pharisees attempted to dissuade the crowds out of Jesus' direct hearing. While the Pharisees try to slander Jesus behind his back, Jesus refutes them directly with two arguments. First, he says, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?" (v. 25b–26). In their haste to demonize Jesus, they did not consider the logical impossibility that Satan would empower Jesus so that Jesus could work toward's Satan defeat. On the face of it, their argument is self-defeating. Second, Jesus shows that their accusation would also cast aspersions on others whom they did not intend to attack: "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges" (v. 27). The Pharisees were not really attacking what Jesus was *doing*; they were attacking *Jesus*.⁴

Binding the Strong Man (Matt. 12:28–29)

After refuting their accusations, Jesus makes a positive claim about what he is doing: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (v. 28). Hendriksen rightly points out that the "if" in this sentence is not expressing a hypothetical situation: "This 'if' means 'if, as is actually the case.'"⁵ Whereas Jesus normally speaks about the kingdom of heaven throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the idea of "kingdom of God" in this case calculated to refute the *personal* source of his power for casting out demons: not by power from the devil, but by power from God. By this, Jesus implicitly charges the Pharisees with the sin of blasphemy: "This royal divine rule has reached to you, is present as having arrived for you, and you can see it in the abject defeat of Satan and his demons in every demoniac's deliverance. Only devilish minds could deny what was so evident."⁶ Jesus will make this charge explicit a bit later.

Then, Jesus explains his actions from a different direction that is altogether intriguing: "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" (v. 29). In this statement, it is clear that the "strong man" refers to Satan (as most commentators acknowledge). If so, then three questions remains. First, what is Satan's "house"? By Satan's house, Jesus seems to refer to the world under the bondage of sin and the rule of the "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Second, what are Satan's "goods"? Since in this context Jesus has just exorcised a demon from a man, the "goods" of Satan seems to refer to people under the devil's dominion.

The third question is more difficult: What does Jesus mean when he speaks of binding Satan? To some degree, Jesus is speaking of the whole course of his redemptive work, which Hendriksen

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 475.

⁴ "He charges them with passing an unjust and malicious decision, because in the same case they did not decide in a similar manner, but as they were affected towards the persons. Now this inequality shows, that their prevailing motive was not a regard to what is just and right, but blind love or hatred." (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 2:69.)

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 526.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 480.

describes as an growing “process of binding or curtailment of power that was going to be further strengthened by means of his victory over Satan on the cross (Col. 2:15) and in the resurrection, ascension, and coronation (Rev. 12:5, 9–12).”⁷ Brandon Crowe, however, offers a more precise solution by arguing that Jesus here speaks of his own victory over Satan during his temptation in Matthew 4:1–11:⁸

In all three Synoptics [i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke], the temptation is the first action of Jesus after being baptized and anointed as Messiah; before Jesus heals any diseases or casts out any demons, he first overcomes Satan’s opposition. After this initial victory, Jesus begins to demonstrate his victory over Satan’s realm in various ways....Only after this initial victory does Jesus proclaim the imminence of the coming kingdom ([Matt.] 4:17). From this we should conclude that the kingdom comes after the initial victory over Satan, which Jesus later identifies as the binding of the strong man.⁹

Satan’s sway over this world draws its authority because of the sin of the first man, Adam. Now that the second Adam has come, Jesus’ victory over Satan’s temptation deprives Satan of any power over Jesus. Because Jesus defeats Satan’s temptation, the devil is powerless to resist Jesus’ plundering of his goods as he casts out Satan’s minions from oppressing the people whom Jesus came to save.¹⁰ Satan’s house *will* be divided and laid waste, but not because it was Satan who had empowered Jesus to cast out demons. Rather, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil by the power of the kingdom of God (1 John 3:8). Or, to put this another way, Jesus does not have power through his *dependence* upon Satan, but by his *mastery* over Satan.

Blaspheming the Spirit (Matt. 12:30–32)

Jesus then draws an important implication from what he has presented so far: “Whoever is not

⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 527.

⁸ See also Lenski on this point: “This binding was the victory recorded in 4:1–11. The objection that the latter was moral while the power over the demoniacs was physical, is irrelevant, since Satan gained his physical power to hurt by his moral victory in tempting man into sin. Hence the victory of Jesus reversed this moral victory by vanquishing Satan in another temptation.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 481.)

⁹ Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 158.

¹⁰ Crowe also significantly connects this idea of binding to the nature of Satan’s binding described in Revelation 20:1–3: “The relationship between the binding of Satan and the gospel going to the gentiles also seems to be in view in Revelation 20:1–3....Significantly, this binding is specifically identified as restraint from deceiving the nations (20:3), which entails the preaching of the gospel to the nations and their coming to faith (cf. Acts 14:16; 17:30). In Revelation 20 this initial binding of Satan comes through Jesus’s death and resurrection, though it is also quite possible that this binding had already begun during Jesus’s ministry. If so, then Revelation 20 may betray a similar perspective to the binding of the strong man in Matthew, since the binding of the devil leads to the spread of the gospel among the nations, though his final demise has not yet come.” (Crowe, *The Last Adam*, 165.)

with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (v. 30). The Pharisees were correct that Jesus’ miracles represented some kind of supernatural power, but they were entirely wrong to attribute that power to the devil. Jesus is essentially using the same lines of logic, but from the opposite direction: If Jesus is indeed bringing the kingdom of God, then anyone who is not with him stands outside the kingdom of God, and will scatter. France puts it this way: “This pithy saying clarifies the position into which the Pharisees have put themselves. It divides humanity simply into two groups; there is no middle ground.”¹¹

Then, Jesus takes his logic a step further: “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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” (vv. 31–32). This “unforgivable sin” has generated a tremendous amount of discussion; however, the context that we have observed so far goes a long way to explain Jesus’ meaning. Jesus has been saying that his work to bring in the kingdom of God has been by the power of the Spirit of God. Therefore, Osborne argues that the “key” to understanding this passage is understanding “the Spirit as the active force of God in this world. To slander God or Jesus is one thing, but to slander his work in this world through the Spirit is another. Since the Spirit is the instrument through which God’s eschatological salvation has entered the world, blaspheming that divine tool of salvation behind Jesus cannot be forgiven.”¹²

Therefore, Jesus is describing a mindset that extends beyond mere disobedience, lack of faith, or any other heinous sins. Hendriksen’s pastoral words of comfort on this point are worth quoting at length:

For anyone who is truly penitent, no matter how shameful his transgressions may have been, there is no reason to despair (Ps. 103:12; Isa. 1:18; 44:22; 55:6, 7; Mic. 7:18–20; I John 1:9). On the other hand, there is no concern to the average church member. The blasphemy against the Spirit is the result of gradual progress in sin. Grieving the Spirit (Eph. 4:30), if unrepented of, leads to resisting the Spirit (Acts 7:51), which, if persisted in, develops into quenching the Spirit (I Thess. 5:19).¹³

The kind of blasphemy that Jesus is describing, on the other hand, is a deliberate rejection of the gospel of Jesus “in full awareness that this is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Spirit, even though there can be no other explanation of Jesus’ exorcisms than that. It thus becomes a declaration that one is against God.”¹⁴ It is the kind of deliberate, knowing rebellion that the Scriptures speak of regarding a hardened, or seared, conscience, where someone has sinned the sin that leads to death (Rom. 9:14–24; 11:7; 1 Tim. 4:2; 1 John 5:16). As Calvin writes, “As we maintain, that he who has been truly regenerated by the Spirit cannot possibly fall into so horrid a crime, so, on the other hand, we must believe that those who

¹¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 481.

¹² Osborne, *Matthew*, 477.

¹³ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 529.

¹⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 337.

have fallen into it never rise again; nay, that in this manner God punishes contempt of his grace, by hardening the hearts of the reprobate, so that they never have any desire towards repentance.”¹⁵

Whenever we deal with such warnings, though, we should remember their purpose. Jesus uses these words of warnings in order to spur us to repentance: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Let those who have ears to hear repent from their sins and turn in faith to the Son of Man through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus’ miracle demonstrate about his identity and his power (v. 22)? What do the people mean when they ask whether Jesus might be the “Son of David” (v. 23)? What has Matthew told us about Jesus as the Son of David so far? How do the Pharisees react to the sentiments of the crowd (v. 24)? How does Jesus respond to their accusations (vv. 25–27)? What does Jesus teach us about the spiritual warfare taking place in this world?
2. Who is “the Spirit of God” (v. 28)? What role does the Holy Spirit have in Jesus’ work of casting out demons? If Jesus is God, why does Jesus rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to do these miracles? What is Jesus’ relationship to the kingdom of God? What is the Holy Spirit’s relationship to the kingdom of God? What is the relationship of the kingdom of God to the kingdom of Satan?
3. Who is the “strong man” (v. 29)? What is the strong man’s house? What are the strong man’s goods? What would it mean for Jesus to plunder those goods? What does it mean for the strong man to be bound? When and where did Jesus bind the strong man? Why was the binding of the strong man so important in the course of Jesus’ life and ministry? How does this passage help us to understand the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1–3?
4. What is Jesus’ warning to those who are not “with him” (v. 30)? What does Jesus mean by blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Why is this blasphemy so severe that it will not be forgiven, even though blasphemy against the Son of Man will be forgiven? Should Christians worry that they may have inadvertently committed this unforgivable sin? Why or why not? How, then, should we apply what Jesus teaches here?

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:76–77.