

The Clash of Kingdoms

Introduction:

As we move back into class after two Sundays of Family Services, we find ourselves almost halfway through the gospel of Matthew. For the last two Sundays, the lessons we would have followed were from the first half of the Sermon on the Mount. The rest of chapter 6 covered the three most common forms of practicing piety in the 1st century: prayer, fasting, and giving of alms. As the Sermon on the Mount closes in chapter 7 we see some familiar themes including the “Ask, seek, and knock” promises, the golden rule, and the closing parable of comparing building our lives on Jesus’ teaching to building a house on rock, or on sand.

Chapters 8 and 9 are shaped in Matthew’s approach of short narrative episodes of Jesus ministering in Galilee and on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. These episodes concentrate on Jesus’ healing and casting out demons, interspersed with short teaching episodes on particular topics. It’s here where we’re introduced to Jesus’ authority to forgive sins followed by meeting the tax collector called Matthew, and watching and listening to Jesus at dinner in his house. Chapter 9 closes with Jesus exorcising a demon but being accused by Jewish religious leaders of doing so by the power of the “prince of demons.”

Chapter 10 opens with the naming of Jesus’ twelve selected disciples as Matthew then presents the 2nd discourse of this gospel—the instructions to his disciples for itinerant ministry in Galilee. In that teaching we hear Jesus repeating the name “Beelzebul,” the name Jewish leaders called Jesus--“prince of demons” which, for them was an equivalent of ‘Satan.’ Chapter 11 follows with Jesus talking about John the Baptist and John’s role in what was happening in Jesus’ ministry.

As we open up chapter 12, we find Matthew working with the contrast between the crowds’ increasingly positive response to Jesus, and the Jewish leaders’ determined rejection of him, already plotting how to destroy him. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to synagogue on the Sabbath, but on the way stop in a grain field to get a snack because they’re hungry. Immediate criticism follows. While at synagogue, Jesus heals a man, declaring that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, in full opposition to the Jewish leaders, for whom any good action that’s not an immediate emergency is considered “work,” and therefore unlawful to do on the Sabbath. Which brings us to our text for today in the middle of Matthew chapter 12. Jesus and his disciples have come back into public ministry after taking a well-deserved retreat.

1. Three questions: Read Matthew 12:22-29

There are three short sections in this reading, each with a specific question that shapes the sense of the text. The first is the crowd’s reaction to the exorcism, with its accompanying question. The second is the Pharisees reaction to the miracle, with Jesus’ question as part of the following dialogue. The third is a parable used as an illustration, in the form of another question. I want us to look at this passage with a concentration on these three questions.

The first question is the closing of v. 23. The biblical text as printed in the quarterly is an incorrect translation of the question. George Lyons, the author of the printed lesson, prints the correct translation of the original question in the first paragraph of the lesson. He taught Greek at Olivet and at Northwest Nazarene. I taught Greek at ANU and at Olivet and we would be sure that all of our students knew how to translate that question correctly. Lyons corrects the reading with the translation: “This couldn’t be the Son of David, could it?”

The question is the one that indicates the response of the crowd to this particular healing. When our Bibles say, “Could this be the Son of David?” that’s technically not the question, they’re asking.

Let’s try an illustration: what would the difference be if your husband asked you, “You wouldn’t want to go visit the grandchildren next week, would you?” than if he asked, “Would you like to go visit our grandchildren next week?” The first question aims at a negative answer with a potential positive, and no thoughtful grandfather would ever ask that question. The other one promotes a positive answer and raises excitement about the fulfillment of the suggestion. Think about the question as it is really stated and we’ll come back to that during the discussion time.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, appear to be quite entrenched in their evaluation of who Jesus is. First of all, they reduce him to one word, which has the basic derogatory meaning of “this guy,” almost, “this nobody.” Then, they declare that the power to do what he’s doing is demonic. Jesus, the good rabbi that he is, comes back by responding first to the absurdity of their logic, and then raises a question of his own: “If I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?” In other words, both Jesus and the crowd know that there were Jewish religious workers engaged in the legitimate ministry of exorcism. Let’s look at these first two of the three questions found in this reading.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What does the negative form of the question raised by the crowd say about their response to Jesus?
2. What might that say about how we might measure effectiveness in witnessing?
3. How does Jesus’ question to the Pharisees respond to the accusation they’ve made against him?
4. What kind of response does Jesus’ question call for?
5. Let’s say you’re a 1st-century Jew with a ministry of exorcism. How do you think you would respond to this dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees?

Jesus already gave a hint of an answer to this last question when he said, “they will be your judges,” where ‘they’ refers to the known Jewish exorcists who were doing that kind of work in God’s name. And Jesus makes it clear that if the Jewish exorcists were not getting their power from Satan, then he, like them, was getting it from God. The dialogue gets into the realm of one of Matthew’s favorite themes, the Kingdom. Specifically, Matthew introduces the clash between two spiritual kingdoms—the kingdom of Satan, that kingdom to which Jesus refers in

his statement in v. 25—"the kingdom divided against itself." Then, in v. 28, the kingdom of God, which is present and active in this scene.

That clash of kingdoms introduces the third question Matthew wants us to look at: "How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man?"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. To whom is Jesus referring with the expression, "the strong man"?
2. What other possible answers might there be rather than the most obvious one?
3. What do you think Jesus is saying by the clause, "carry off his possessions," the language of plunder?

II. The unpardonable sin. Read Matthew 12:30-32

These verses introduce one of those highly controversial and often disturbing topics--the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, a sin for which there is no forgiveness, so says Jesus. Before I get into that topic, let's take a minute to look at v. 30. Here, Jesus seems to be working with either harvesting or shepherding language. George Lyons suggests that with this statement, Jesus calls anyone in his audience to choose the right side in the kingdom clash that's being presented. As the promised "Son of David," Jesus would be the promised shepherd of God's sheep in the place of the shepherds currently in place: the Pharisees at the time of the writing of this gospel. That challenges those members who have questions about who Jesus is, to make a decision in relationship to what they've been hearing and observing. Jesus' opponents in this episode have gone way beyond misjudging the person of Jesus; they have blasphemed the power source behind everything he says and does--the Holy Spirit of God. That's what the next two verses of this section are about.

The feature article for today's lesson in the Teacher's Guide, the Illustrated Bible Life booklet, is an article on "Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit" by Robert Doyle Smith.

[NOTE to online participants: Robert Doyle Smith is a member of the Sunday School class at College Church for which these lessons are prepared each week. I have asked him to offer to the class any thoughts he might have on the topic either from the article or beyond it. Those thoughts will not be available in this printed lesson.]

As Jesus was trying to bring God's sheep back into the fold, his detractors (Pharisees and other Jewish leaders) were handing them over to Satan. Their sin was not just that of rejecting Jesus for who he was, but claiming that the Holy Spirit, Jesus' source of power, was none other than the prince of demons, that is, Satan himself. Whereas the crowd in the audience is still questioning whether Jesus might be the promised one, the opponents were adamant, not only about who Jesus was but what was happening through his ministry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Several of us may have heard preaching about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, some of it perhaps accurate, some of it perhaps quite off base, designed to get people to come to an altar to pray the sinner's prayer. What does this text indicate that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is, and what does it look like here?
2. All writers working with this lesson agree that an anguished concern about having committed this sin is proof they it hasn't been. How do we know that?

III. That which is visible inside-out. Matthew 12:33-37

Because Matthew uses the approach of short, independent episodes in Jesus' life to present the gospel, we often try to analyze the sequence of these episodes for any hint of potential relationship between them. Luke has this paragraph in his gospel, too, but locates it in a totally different context. Mark doesn't have it all. Because our lesson writers and editors have included this pericope (paragraph) with what we've seen so far, it is their way of demonstrating how this teaching of Jesus fits the situation we've just looked at, and perhaps even help us understand something more about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. This is the second time Matthew uses the phrase, "brood of vipers." When was the first time, under what circumstance, and how does that circumstance relate to this one?
2. In verse 35, Jesus talks about bringing things out of what's been stored up. Where else in this gospel does that same language occur?
3. The word for "bad" in 'bad fruit' in v. 33 is a word that means rotten, putrid, even poisonous. The word for "empty" in 'empty word' in v. 35 is a word that means idle, useless, worthless. The expression "empty word" is also used for 'slander' and 'verbal abuse.' How does that language speak to the idea of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and or sin not being forgiven?

Conclusion:

For this lesson I want to draw my conclusion from two sources: first, from George Lyons' conclusion to the commentary on this lesson, and second, from Joe Foltz's statement on yesterday's *Reflecting God* devotional. Dr. Lyons says, "the orthodox confession that 'Jesus is Lord' is tested by the way we live. Jesus said, 'not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.'" Rev. Foltz adds what he confronted spiritually while studying for Bible quizzing as a teenager. He says, "I had two options: I either needed to begin to live for Jesus 100 percent of the time or stop living for Jesus 100 percent so that I'd stop confusing people about how a Christian was actually supposed to live." It is the Holy Spirit who makes the tree a good tree. It is the refusal to follow the Holy Spirit which makes the tree a bad tree. As long as the heart is tender toward the things of God, the Holy Spirit has not been blasphemed.