

“When Miracles Aren’t Enough”

Matthew 12:22-37

January 27, 2019

The Bible has many sober warnings, yet among the most grave is the warning against hardening one’s heart. For example, the writer of Hebrews repeatedly exhorts us: *“Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts”* (3:7-8, 15; 4:7).

What are some ways in which we might harden our hearts? Hebrews 3 gives us a number of clues:

1. *We harden our hearts by catering to the deceitfulness of sin rather than heeding encouragement from the Scriptures [Heb 3:12-13].*
2. *We harden our hearts by disobedience* (Hebrews 3:15-19).
3. *We harden our hearts by persistent unbelief [Hebrews 3:15-19].*

We know that this unbelief is persistent unbelief because earlier in chapter 3 the writer of Hebrews refers to how the Israelites provoked the Lord by trying Him and testing Him in the face of beholding God’s miraculous works for 40 years (7-11).

They heard God’s voice, but it was no benefit to them because they did not receive it with faith (Heb 4:2). Thus...

4. *We harden our hearts when we hear the Word but don’t appropriate it with faith* (Heb 4:2).

Proverbs 29:1 says, *“A man who hardens his neck (remains stiff-necked) after many rebukes, will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.*

- This was true of Pharaoh whose heart was increasingly hardened by failing to listen to the Lord repeatedly. And he was suddenly destroyed in the Red Sea—without remedy.

- It was true of the Israelites who died in the wilderness because they saw God’s works for 40 years yet persisted in rebellious unbelief. How ironic that both Pharaoh and the very Israelites that God delivered from his hand both died from hardened hearts that refused to listen to the Lord and provoked God’s judgment.
- It’s also true of those today who reject Christ, clearly understanding the gospel and the truthfulness of Christ.

Here’s what I want us to see from the example of Israel in the wilderness: ***Persistent unbelief so hardens the heart that it will not be satisfied even by grand scale miracles of any magnitude.***

Well today, in Matthew 12 Jesus is going to issue a warning against the Pharisees whose persistent unbelief has so hardened their hearts that they refuse to believe even in the face of grand scale miraculous evidence.

As we saw last week, Matthew had made the connection between Jesus’ ministry and the promised anointing of the Holy Spirit on Yahweh’s Servant in Isaiah 42 (Matt 12:18). The question in today’s passage is, will the Pharisees and the crowds recognize Jesus as God’s Spirit-anointed Servant, the Messiah?

In vs. 22, Jesus performs a grand-scale miracle: *“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.”*

Now pause for just a minute to take in this man’s situation. The grammar of vs. 22 indicates that it was highly likely that this man’s blindness and inability to speak was caused by the demonic oppression he was experiencing.¹ It may also be possible, that his mute condition was the result of deafness—though we would need to speculate at that point.

What’s important to see is that this man’s life has been so dominated and taken over by demonic spirits that he is left helpless and miserable—trapped in the dungeon of his own body. Just imagine for a moment not

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, pg. 287.

being able to see or speak.... This man can't even seek help. He can't go looking for Jesus because he's blind. He can't ask for anyone to help him get to Jesus because he is mute. He lives in constant torment from demons who have taken over his faculties and are using his body as their home of operation.

Imagine an intruder coming into your home, tying you up, blindfolding you, and tying a gag around your mouth; then helplessly sitting there as they run their drug operation and gang activity out of your home. That's what this man's life is like.

But someone had mercy on this man and brought him to Jesus and in an single effortless moment, Jesus demonstrated His authority to over both the spiritual world of darkness and the physical world of sickness and set this man free to see and speak, free of demonic influence.

Verse 23 tells us that the crowds were absolutely amazed by this. It's not that they hadn't see Jesus heal our cast out demons before, but to them this miracle was so grand-scale, demonstrating effortless authority over demonic spirits as well as healing multiple major ailments, that they concluded with astonishment, he must be the Son of David, the Messiah.

This is the last conclusion that the Pharisees wanted the crowds to come to, yet they can't deny the supernatural power by which Jesus has done these things. So they seek to discredit Jesus by attributing his miracles to the only other source of supernatural power besides God. They say, "*this man casts our demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons*" (24). Beelzebul was a common reference to Satan.

My impression is that the Pharisees were not directly addressing Jesus with this accusation but were murmuring their slanderous unbelief among the people, because vs. 25 says that Jesus *knew their thoughts* and then addressed them directly.

Jesus begins his response with the logic of common sense: "*Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?*"

Now, is it possible to imagine that Satan, being a deceiver, might posture his emissary as an angel of light, appearing to exercise opposition against kingdom of darkness with an occasional exorcism to deceive the people. In fact, 2 Cor 11:14-15 tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and his servants will disguise themselves as servants of righteousness—for a time.

But here's the problem with the Pharisees' accusation. Throughout His ministry, Jesus' "widespread expulsion of demons...constitutes no minor strategic retreat, but a wholesale assault on Satan's" earthly kingdom.² In other words, Jesus is bringing demise to the kingdom of darkness wherever he goes.

Next Jesus exposes the faulty character of his accusers expressed through their hypocritical prejudice and bias. Jesus says in vs. 27, "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."

The point Jesus is making in vs. 27 is that some of the Pharisees' own disciples performed occasional exorcisms. Yet Jesus does it with great ease and in much greater magnitude. If they want to render a judgment about Jesus, perhaps they should ask their own exorcists. Here Jesus has backed them into a corner. If their own exorcists say Jesus works by Satan's power, they condemn themselves. But if they acknowledge that Jesus works by God's power, then they not only expose the Pharisees' accusation as false but also reveal that by opposing Jesus, they are hostile to the kingdom of God.

² Craig Keener, *IVPNTC: Matthew*, pg. 230. See also: Matt 4:24; 8:16; 8:28-34; 9:32-35; 10:1

Jesus presses the point further in vs. 29 by stating the obvious: “How can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man?” In other words, Jesus is plundering Satan’s kingdom, taking back Satan’s captives and setting them free. The only way this is possible is if He binds Satan with a superior power. And the only superior power to Satan is God. Therefore, the kingdom of God (vs. 28) is overcoming the kingdom of Satan in the ministry of Jesus.

There are no other sources of spiritual power—just God and Satan. So Jesus issues a dividing line in vs. 30 where there can be no neutral ground: “*He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.*” The first part is clear. If you aren’t actively cooperating and contributing to what Jesus is doing, you are against Him. There is no spiritual no-man’s land.

But what about the second part of vs. 30, “he who does not gather with me scatters?” Harvest was an image that was often used to describe the final day of judgment. Remember back in Matt 3:12, John the Baptist said of Jesus, “*His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*”

Jesus is the One who harvests. He is the One who renders God’s judgment. Either you are working with Him and for Him to gather in the harvest of God’s kingdom or you are working against Him, destroying the harvest, scattering and leading astray those who will suffer the unquenchable fire.

This brings us now to the heart of Jesus warning in [vs. 31-32]. The first thing I want you to notice is that there is a lot of grace in vs. 31. Do you see it? “Any sin and [even] blasphemy shall be forgiven!” God’s road of forgiveness is wide in the sense that there is no sin or any combination or multitude of sins that will not be forgiven in response to a repentant heart of faith. Yet if that grace is rejected, the consequences are severe and

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 508.

⁴ Ibid.

irrevocable. The only sin unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

What is blasphemy? In a general sense, blasphemy refers to defiant irreverence or slander toward God. It is a sin that can be forgiven. For example, many people have spoken maliciously or defiantly against Christ and even publicly slandered Him yet later were brought to repentance and became devoted followers of Christ. The apostle Paul himself would fit into this category.

But what is unique about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Remember that the Holy Spirit’s primary ministry is to enlighten or reveal who Christ is. It is the Holy Spirit who opens blind eyes to see and perceive not only the sinfulness of one’s sin, but more importantly Christ’s sufficiency to cover our sin. The Holy Spirit is the revealer of truth!

Keep in mind the context of Matthew 12. “The Pharisees, in spite of clear demonstrations of the work of the Holy Spirit in front of their eyes, willfully rejected Jesus’ authority and his teaching and attributed it to the devil.”³ Their accusation was “a classic, willful, malicious lie.”⁴ They knew the truth. They knew what they were doing. And they did it anyway. That kind of willful rejection of the truth leads to a hardening of heart that will eventually be irreversible. We are not talking about ignorance or even unbelief, but willful rejection of what one knows to be true.

D. A. Carson explains that **blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is “rejection of the...truth in full awareness that that is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit”** (D.A. Carson)⁵ It is determined rejection of the truth. Determined disbelief.

Theologian Louis Berkhof puts it this way. Blasphemy of the Spirit is “the conscious, malicious, and willful rejection and slander, against evidence and conviction, [by] the testimony of the Holy Spirit respecting the grace of God in Christ, attributing it out of hatred and enmity to the Prince of Darkness....In committing that sin man willfully, maliciously, and intentionally attributes what is clearly recognized as the work of God to the influence and operation of Satan.”⁶

⁵ D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, pg. 291-292.

⁶ Quoted by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 508-509.

Let me quote at length Wayne Grudem:

The context [of Matthew 12] indicates that Jesus is speaking about a sin that is not simply unbelief or rejection of Christ, but one that includes 1) a clear knowledge of who Christ is and of the power of the Holy Spirit working through Him, 2) a willful rejection of the facts about Christ that His opponents knew to be true, and 3) slanderously attributing the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ to the power of Satan. In such a case the hardness of heart would be so great that any ordinary means of bringing a sinner to repentance would already have been rejected. Persuasion of the truth will not work, for these people have already known the truth and willfully rejected it. Demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and bring life will not work, for they have seen it and rejected it....The sin is unpardonable because it cuts off the sinner from repentance and saving faith through belief in the truth.⁷

I believe this is the same sin that Hebrews 6 refers to in the case those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit and tasted the good word of God and the power of the age to come yet have fallen away. For them it is impossible to be brought again to repentance (Heb 6:4-6). Hence, Hebrews 10 warns that *“if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice of sin but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries...[having] insulted the spirit of grace”* (Heb 10:26-29).

So Jesus is warning us about a hardening of the heart that can become irreversible by seeing and comprehending the truth, yet outrightly rejecting it.

Incidentally, those who worry or fret that they have committed the unpardonable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, demonstrate by their concern enough tenderness of heart to be assured they have not committed that sin. Hearts with settled hardness against the Spirit’s revelation of Jesus Jesus don’t go around worrying about it.

Having issued this severe warning, Jesus now issues a word of rebuke to the Pharisees in vs. 33-37. He uses the analogy of a fruit tree. If the tree is good, the fruit is good. But if the fruit is bad you know the tree is bad. Then He

levels this rebuke in vs. 34: “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” In other words, they speak malicious lies because their hearts are evil.

Verse 36: “But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.” What does Jesus mean when he says every *careless* word will be held to account. The Greek term literally means empty. Every empty word, every unsubstantiated or false word. Every hypocritical word.

The Pharisee have just made an unsubstantiated (empty, false) accusation against Jesus. From their evil hearts they have hypocritically accused Him who is good of being evil. They have spoke false, empty words by attributing His ministry to the power of Satan. Words for which they will be held accountable on the final day of judgment.

Then in the last verse, Jesus turns the tables on His accusers when He says, “for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (36). Your words reveal your heart and your heart determines where you stand in relationship to God. The irony is that they think they are making a judgment or assessment of Christ when in reality their words expose their hearts and become the very means by which they will be judged by God.

Here’s the life principle: ***Your assessment of Jesus is the means by which you will be assessed by God, whether justified or condemned.*** If you treasure Christ, you will be treasured by God with love and mercy. If you reject Christ, you will be rejected by God and subject to His wrath against your sin. So today, if you hear the Spirit’s voice as He testifies of Jesus, do not harden your heart.

The good news is that God’s grace to forgive is open wide to you. Jesus took upon Himself God’s judgment for sin so that if you believe and receive Him as Lord, you will be saved.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 508.