

Matthew 12:22-45:

Friends! I'm beginning with prayer this morning!

Prayer:

Remembering:

So, we saw last week how Jesus lays out that, as the Son of Man, the Messiah, the long awaited king who follows in David's footsteps, he has rights over the Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping, how to do it, was the Pharisees greatest symbol when it came to their religious way of life, and Jesus, in their own synagogue, claims he has rights over it that they don't have. They get angry for all the reasons we talked about last week, and decide it's time to kill him. He's overstepped his bounds.

Today:

Today we'll see as the Pharisees entrench themselves. They've made a choice. Jesus is bad, he's on the wrong side of God; they've decided they are on the right side. They're pretty sure that was decided a long time ago, by God, in fact. And they settle into their position. But Jesus doesn't let them simply, smugly, feel righteous, toss out lines about how bad he is. He challenges them on all their assumptions.

Out of the Gate:

Jesus heals a man possessed by demons. I'm going to

assume some background knowledge here, because we only have so much time, but these are evil spiritual beings, who are ranked under the head evil spiritual being, and do what that enemy of God does.

There are all sorts of different names for this character, this main antagonist to God's creation. Revelation talks about "the devil, the ancient serpent, the satan." "Prince of the air" and the Pharisees', "Beelzebul" are other names we see. The world as pictured in the Bible--so we might want to take this view pretty seriously--is one in which creation is constantly being impacted and affected by unseen spiritual beings, good and bad. One way of understanding Jesus' mission in the world is that he's re-establishing God's reign over creation in part by taking it back from the devil, who had usurped it by tricking humanity, keeping us wrapped up in sin and evil and under the thumb of these evil spiritual beings, these demons. In the places where the Church has little power and desperately needs God to solve its problems, this view of the world shows up consistently; in places where the Church has plenty of power, cash, and technology, it doesn't come up quite as much. But it's biblical, so, we all ought to deal with that.

Jesus has already pointed out to John's disciples that one sign among many that he is the Messiah Israel was hoping for is that he frees people from the hold

demons have on their lives. And now someone brings him a man whose blind and dumb--mute--and Jesus heals him. The Pharisees explain it away in a way that makes sense of how they view the world. They say that Jesus is doing this because the devil's given him the power to do it. Which seems to make sense, at first, if you don't think too deeply it much. Jesus isn't an ambassador of God, they argue, he's an ambassador of the devil, using the devil's power as the head evil guy to send away the little evil guys. He's got authority over the troops.

He does, but not because he's borrowed it from Satan. It's his birthright.

Explaining Away:

"...when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. 26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? 27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God

that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

Jesus points out, simply, that their reasoning is flawed. Their reasoning is flawed. If Jesus is using the devil’s power to take out the devil’s work, then he’s acting against the devil’s interests. So why would the enemy give him power? It’s dumb. It’s bad logic. The devil doesn’t work that way, no one does; and if he does, then all the similar work they do, they must be on the devil’s side, just like they are saying he is.

I appreciate that Jesus takes the time to point out how wrong they are. He doesn’t have to. He doesn’t always. But he does here. Because it raises a legitimate question: How is Jesus doing what he’s doing? Now, we’ve been given dozens of answers, dozens of proofs, that he’s doing what he’s doing by the Spirit of God, and it’s a sign that Jesus is inaugurating God’s renewed reign over creation, reclaiming from the devil what our enemy never had a right to rule anyway. But, frankly, I don’t think we can have enough moments like this. Because Jesus, by saying “If I’m doing this by God” instead of, simply, “I am doing this by the Spirit of God,” by starting with

that if, he's challenging us to decide what we believe about Jesus' power. And we need that challenge in an ongoing way, we need positioned to answer that with a yes, over and over, because following Jesus is hard, and whenever we affirm Jesus' is who he says he is, it is a chance for a deep breath and renewed commitment. And we're given this here.

The Pharisees are given the same thing, which is a gracious thing, considering how entrenched they have become in their belief that Jesus is the bad guy, an agent of the devil, instead of God's Messiah.

A Response:

He knows where they stand. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees here. They've just ascribed the work he's doing enabled by the devil. It's not though, right? It's enabled by the Holy Spirit. They don't believe that, of course. And then Jesus says this, in warning to them.

30 "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 31 And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Blasphemy & The Holy Spirit

Let's talk about this, because, frankly, it might make us anxious, and if not anxious, at least confused. The last thing we want is to not be forgiven--whether, you know, broadly, or even specifically.

So what is blasphemy? "Blaspheme" is one of those words, like baptism, which is a greek word that we've made into an English one. We don't translate it, we just copy it over. Its most basic meaning is to speak against someone in such a way that we cause harm to their reputation, we mess with their credibility. There are ways this word gets translated now & then: defame, slander. We could use "diss," if we were making a hip--well, 1990s hip--translation.

When it comes to God, to blaspheme is to bring God down in the eyes of people around you. An easy way to bring God down, the easiest and most common, was to publicly lift yourself up to God's level, to imply that you and God are on an equal level. Jesus does this now & then. It's the final piece of the puzzle that gets him killed, actually, in a trial in front of the Temple's High Priest. He, of course, was the only one who could get away with it.

The Holy Spirit, partnering in Jesus, was the power by which Jesus did all the miracles he's doing, including kicking unseen spiritual enemies out of people when they had made their homes in them. And we also need

to remember the Holy Spirit is at work in our salvation in every way. The Spirit convicts people of sin, leads us to a saving relationship with Jesus, is alive in us personally as a comforter and counselor, and active in us as a church to do God's work in the world.

Imagine:

So, imagine for a second taking over the Holy Spirit's forgiveness job. If we try to take over the Holy Spirit's forgiveness job, try to make ourselves equal with the Holy Spirit--which is blasphemy at it's most common--then the Spirit's gifts to us--the power to stop sinning, the freedom from judgment that comes from Jesus--we lose them. It's like sawing off the limb you're sitting on, or, say, selling your computer so you can pay for a software upgrade. Trading your golf clubs for a club membership. You can't.

It undoes itself. Does this make sense? Blaspheming the Holy Spirit undoes the Spirit's work in our lives. It breaks the relationship, and the benefits that come from it. We can speak a word against the Son of Man, and we'll be forgiven--but to imply that we can do the Holy Spirit's work, any of it, is to cut ourselves off from maybe the most active partner in our salvation.

And the Pharisees, in their hypocrisy, were doing exactly this. Their rituals, which they thought were keeping themselves holy in God's eyes, had slowly and sneakily sawn off the limb they were sitting on. They

turned away from the forgiveness God provided and made up replacement rules, a holiness that wasn't holy. It was hypocrisy in the worst way, but the Pharisees were blind to it.

And Jesus is again, again, letting them know that the position they are taking is one that will not result in their good, in God's pleasure, in sin's forgiveness. I don't know why he keeps trying to persuade them by telling them the truth, but he does. He must want them to see him for who he is. But if they blaspheme against God by attributing God's intervention to God's greatest enemy, then they are cutting themselves off from the source of God's forgiveness.

We don't have to worry that somehow we're going to slander the Spirit and commit some unforgivable sin. To put it another way, Jesus is saying that the only unforgivable sin is to reject forgiveness. That's reasonable logic, good logic, against the Pharisees' bad logic. The only unforgivable sin is to reject forgiveness, because you can't blow up a road in order to go down it. It doesn't make any sense. You can't say God's work is being done by the devil; you can't lock someone up so they'll experience freedom.

And from here, Jesus takes an apocalyptic tone.

Fruit & Things:

33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

We can take Jesus’ tone here however we want, but the content of what he’s saying is one of challenge. Enormous challenge. Having just demanded that the Pharisees make a choice about whether Jesus is doing things through the Spirit’s power, or the devil’s-- Beelzebub, Satan, The “Ancient Serpent”--he calls them a “brood of vipers,” something John’s called them before. They are bad trees with bad fruit. They are people of evil hearts. And their words prove it.

They’ve attributed the work of God to God’s greatest enemy. They’ve chosen a side, and it’s the wrong side.

Powerful Words:

Words do have power. We know that. Our greatest

wounds and our greatest fears are often tied up in the things that people have said to us. Feelings of insecurity, of distrust, of instability, of worry are plugged into those words, those things said to us, the same way air fresheners get plugged into a socket, but instead of smelling sweet, our lives are filled with rot because of them. Words matter.

Words: Outward:

And they matter in two directions. They matter because they are powerful actors in the world--they can hurt people deeply, bring incredible hope to people, can, actually create in a person a view of the world as a place of wonder or fear. Words and what they can do are a magic that God has given to us. They matter in the world outside us. Some of us have experienced this more than others. I've always been struck by the way those who have been most disempowered have discovered how easily they can build up or destroy through what they say and how they say it.

Words: Inward

And they matter because they are a revelation of the world inside us. They reveal the state of our hearts.

We all know this. We say things we regret saying, we "never meant to say," things we don't really believe, 99% of the time, but we felt in the moment we said them. Words reveal truth, even if it's momentary truth,

an insight into our own inability to control our emotions, as much as anything else, now and then.

And we say things out of love. We make commitments to others that are very-nearly impossible to keep, but just making them enables us to keep up the work of keeping them. We express the joy, the gratitude, the hope we have alive in our souls through the words that come out of our mouths--or the ones we write, we text, we type, we sign.

And Jesus says something that ought to give us pause. He's saying it to the Pharisees, of course: They've used their words, their great power of speech, to tell the world that all God's power is actually borrowed from Satan. Doing so has revealed the depth of the corruption in their own hearts, and their commitment to stand against Jesus instead of alongside him. He reveals to them, and to us, this:

"...everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

What's this mean?

And this means something for us. There are implications for us regarding what Jesus says here. At its most basic, it means that we have to deal with our

hearts, because this is the place words are born. We have to check in with our souls. And the reason we ought to do this is because our words, which reveal our hearts and affect the world, reveal the condition of our hearts.

I don't think that what Jesus says here means we ought to live in fear of accidentally saying something wrong. But what do we curse? What do we bless?

We'll give an account for every word we speak, even if it was funny, even if we were joking, even if we were, per our list of reasons, completely justified in saying it. We don't have to fear judgment, but isn't it worthwhile to make sure there are fewer things on our list of "things we shouldn't have said" than there could be? Isn't that just reasonable? It's at least faithful, I think.

Do we take seriously the power of our words? Do we have the courage to accept that how we talk about things reveals what's going on in our hearts? If we had the courage to accept that, we'd have the humility to repent when someone points out the sinful effects of our words. We'd have the corresponding humility to accept the gratitude a person might show when we have blessed them by what we've said. We'd have the inclination to deal with our souls, and do what we have to do to clean up our hearts.

Going On:

Jesus goes on from here to give his first nod to his resurrection. He draws a link between the Old Testament story of Jonah, and his three days in the belly of the fish, only to be rescued by God, to his own three days in a tomb, only to be rescued by God. He, of course, wasn't rescued simply from a certain death, but from death itself. He suggests that those who see it, this "sign," will reject him anyway, and be condemned by Ninevah, who heard what Jonah told them and turned to God and away from their sin. The passage ends with this statement:

43 "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. 44 Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. 45 Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

Remember, Jesus has just forced an "impure spirit," an evil spirit, out of a person. That person's standing there now, able to see and to speak maybe for the first time. I wonder if, as Jesus says this, he's looking at this person he just healed, whose heard all the exchanges between the Pharisees and him, and if that person's

listening, there is an unspoken, implicit demand: Will you follow me? Or take up the way of the Pharisees? Because to follow Jesus is to have the Holy Spirit make a home in the person; the person's occupied, no evil Spirits can make their home in that person's soul. The implication for everyone else around Jesus is to check in with themselves--or rather, to check in with God, and discover who is at home in them. The passage started with Jesus being told that the work he was doing by the Spirit of God was "actually" being done with the devil's power. The passage ends as Jesus invites the crowd around him to discover what has made a home in their souls.

Conclusion:

The Pharisees had explained away the work of God in a way that made sense to them, you know? They were so locked into what they perceived was good and right and in line with God, that they no longer could see God even when He was right in front of them. They could no longer recognize the Spirit at work, because Jesus didn't operate with the rules that they had come to believe were equal to God. And they entrenched themselves, cutting themselves off from forgiveness, all because they were so committed to their view of the world that they no longer had any room for God in it.

I hope we have room for God in our lives. That we allow some flexibility for God to surprise us. We have

the Holy Spirit alive in us and among us; we have so much more going for us than the Pharisees did. And yet we're always in danger of mistaking our framework of how God ought to behave for the real thing, for God's real behavior.

Let's at least be flexible enough to consider what our words reveal about our hearts. Do the words we say and how we say them reveal a good heart, lined up with the Lord, or one that needs renewed by the Spirit who seeks to make a home in us?

My mom would say, all the time, "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." That's a lie. But it's only a partial lie. It's both what we say and how we say it that reveal whether our hearts are on the side of the Lord or the side of the devil. There is no middle ground in this, I think. Let's make sure we're aligned with faith and hope and love, and not the enemy of all creation. And if we discover something in our hearts that needs changing, invite God to help you in this. Turn to some Christian or Christians that you trust, who love you, who can help you pursue healing and growth in christ-likeness. Explore some useful thing in Scripture that will help your heart become a thing that bears good fruit, and blesses the world. One of the greatest mercies given to us is the mercy to turn toward God in our need, and find our needs met.

So let's watch what we say, welcome the insight our

words give us into the state of our hearts, and chose to live for the God who may, graciously, not meet our expectations, but do better than them. Because, now and then, what we expect of god, the world, others may be more devilish, than it is holy.