

“Binding the Strong Man”

Matthew 12:22-37

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I’ve enjoyed reading stupid warning labels for new products. Sometimes I think the message comes out wrong, and it must be an embarrassment to the company. Here are some of my favorites of supposed real labels:

On a jar of peanut butter: “May contain nuts.”

On a bag of Doritos: “You could be a winner! No purchase necessary. Details inside.”

On a roll of Life Savers: “Not for use as a flotation device.”

Or what about on a chain saw manufactured in Sweden: “Do not attempt to stop saw with your hand” (!)

Ouch! Of course, those are pretty obviously goofy, but sometimes we really do say things we regret saying. We pass along gossip, or we fudge the truth. Maybe we blurt out something cruel, and can’t understand why we said it. The passage this morning helps us understand the importance of the words we speak.

It reads a lot like another healing from chapter nine,

While they were going out, a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”

But the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” (Matthew 9:32-34)

In both stories a man is brought to Jesus. In both stories Jesus heals him. In both stories, the crowd is amazed—the word used in chapter 12 is “astonished.” And in both stories the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the evil one.

The passages highlight a great divide.

Some people are saying that Jesus might be the Son of David, a way of describing the Messiah.

But the leaders of Israel oppose him, and they reach a conclusion that makes no sense. They can’t deny his miracles, so they said Jesus does them by sorcery. They say he heals with the power of Beelzebub, a name for Satan, and so they ratchet up the conflict. In fact, in the passage we looked at last week, when Jesus healed a man’s hand on the Sabbath, they reached the conclusion Jesus needed to be put to death.

In the great divide, you can respond one of two ways. Jesus himself pointed that out in verse 30,

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30).

That's rather absolute, don't you think? A lot of us might be edgy about being pushed into a corner like that. We like to think it doesn't have to be that black and white. But Jesus never said, "Tolerate me," or even, "Admire me." He said "Follow me." You're either with him or against him. And by extension, you're either operating under his headship and sovereignty, or you're under the sway of the evil one, a part of "a wicked and adulterous generation" (12:39). You're on one side of the fence or the other.

This is the great divide. From this point, Jesus' opponents are going to fight him to the bitter end.

It's a remarkable healing story. The healing itself is barely told, pared down to almost no details so it can focus on Jesus' answer to the accusation of his enemies. You don't see anything about the people who brought the man to Jesus. There's nothing about how they asked for help, nothing about whether the blind and mute man had faith. The focus is on Jesus' action.

Why were the people amazed? Because of what the healings were saying about him. Jesus' healings lead them to the conclusion that he might be the Son of David, the Messiah, the One who changes everything by bringing God's end-time salvation to the world. One sign of the conclusion of history would be healing. That's why God's servant, the one who heals, was supposed to be the Messiah, God come to us in the flesh. They were starting to get it.

Not the Pharisees. They were so prejudiced, their minds were made up already. They couldn't see evidence right before their eyes. That contrasts with the blind man whom Jesus made whole. It's like in the healing story in the Gospel of John, where the Pharisees again oppose Jesus. They tell him, "You don't think *we're* blind, do you?" Jesus answered,

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." (John 9:41)

If you don't have spiritual vision, if you don't have eyes to see, something God's doing right in front of you can look like evil. The religious leaders are convinced Jesus is on the side of the enemy, not of God.

Jesus shows the power of God is breaking loose.

When Jesus is accused of using Satan's power, he shows how that's absurd—Satan's rule can't stand if he's at war with himself. Satan can't oppose his own work by doing the work of God in bringing healing and wholeness.

There's another argument, too: God's people were already seeing healing and casting out of demons in Jesus' time. Apparently, God was already at work in followers of the Pharisees casting out demons. Jesus shows that if they credit God with that work, then

they have to say that his work is a sign of God's presence just like in the Jewish community. The Pharisees were wrong about Jesus, and so they were guilty of opposing God.

Early Jewish scholars taught that when God cast out or subdued demons, they were bound, tied up, imprisoned. The strong man is the devil, and binding him means Jesus has defeated him. Jesus can plunder the devil's house, his possessions. He can free people who are demon-possessed, and set free Satan's prisoners.

Jesus gives both good news and bad news.

The good news is God forgives sins, and rescues sinners. The bad news is, there's one exception. Jesus says God forgives everything except for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Now, if Jesus says without forgiveness we are lost in our sins and destined for hell, then that raises a critical question, one that ought to concern everybody: What is blaspheming the Holy Spirit? And how can I make sure not to do it?

We get our clues from the text. Jesus says speaking against him can be forgiven. Is that what the Pharisees were doing? It's clear from the passage that the Pharisees had blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that he casts out demons "by the Spirit of God" (12:28). If you say Jesus is working through Satanic power, then you're not only speaking against him, but you're the Holy Spirit. Remember the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet that points to Jesus:

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen,  
the one I love, in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the nations. (Matthew 12:18)

If you blaspheme against the Spirit, you're dismissing God's work as the work of Satan, and you're throwing away God's work of salvation. That is, you're rejecting in a final sense the saving work of God, and you're ultimately rejecting Christ. It's sad. The Pharisees opposition of Jesus had crossed over into an ultimate rejection, putting their souls in jeopardy. In fact, there's a little more information in another gospel—Mark adds,

He said this because they were saying, "He *has* an evil spirit." (Mark 3:30)

Saying Jesus has an unclean spirit is a sin against the Holy Spirit. It's not simply using the name of Jesus as a swear word, or saying something stupid or irreverent against Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. It's trying to discredit Jesus in the eyes of other people. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit is to ultimately reject Jesus.

I think this suggests some conclusions for us. Let me highlight three things:

First, Jesus is telling us to get serious about following him.

That's why he says, "Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good, or bad, and its fruit will be bad" (12:33) It's not surprising the Pharisees speak evil, because words flow out of the heart. I think Jesus is speaking about himself when he says a good tree can't bear bad fruit. Test him! The power in Jesus can't be wrong, because his words and work are good, like fruit from a good tree.

What kind of heart do you have? You see it by your words. If you go around speaking evil of others, imputing the worst motives, judging what you cannot know and what is God's to judge, that speaks of a heart that's not right. Our words and our works go hand in hand.

Another time, when the Scribes and Pharisees complained about Jesus not doing the ceremonial cleansing before eating, he told them what you eat can't make you clean or defiled. He said,

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts..." (Mark 7:20-21)

That's why we have to get our hearts right, and it can only happen by coming to Jesus Christ in faith. He makes us right by his Spirit when we do that, and he transforms our hearts. It's what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he wrote to the church in Colossae,

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things...

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:1-2, 8-10)

Do you see the sequence? You are "raised with Christ." That means you trust in him, and he gives you his life. Then you focus on what he wants, not what you want. And then your life will start to bear that out in the kind of person you become.

Second, God wants to bind the evil one in your life.

I'm not suggesting Christians can become demon-possessed. But I'm saying the devil wants to exercise influence, to tempt us to be less than we should be. We need to pay attention, because the Bible says,

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...(1 Peter 5:8-9a)

It's interesting how we're supposed to do that. Those words were written by the Apostle Peter, and the verses right before that say,

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,  
"God opposes the proud  
but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5b)

In other words, beware of the work of the devil, and act with humility toward one another. The Apostle Paul makes a similar point when he writes,

Do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:27)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:27, 29-30)

In other words, we look out for the devil, and we let Jesus bind the work and influence of Satan, when we humble ourselves. When we speak right within the family of God. That's important to do, because sometimes when we become anxious in the Christian life, we react of fear or anger or pride. That reflects the strategies of the enemy, not the character of Jesus Christ.

Third, think about where you're going.

Our careless words will follow us to judgment day. There's a day coming when secret thoughts will be known, and there's going to be an accounting. Our fruit tells the character of the tree. But thank God, there is forgiveness, and Jesus saves, so let's trust in his mercy, and make that the mark of our lives and church, too.