

**The Unforgivable Sin**  
**Matthew 12:22-37**  
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In Matthew 12, the narrative shifts from the indifference of the people of Israel to their Messiah to the opposition of the religious leaders of Israel to their Messiah. The first attempt to discredit Jesus is found in Matthew 12:1-8 and was to publicly accuse Him of allowing His disciples to break the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Matthew 12:9-21 is the second attempt to discredit Jesus by publicly accusing Him directly of breaking the Sabbath commandment.

Matthew 12:22-37 expands the attacks against Jesus when the Pharisees denounce His miracles as satanic. This becomes the climax of the opposition where Jesus will turn His ministry toward the disciples and away from the Jewish leaders in Matthew 13. Jesus responds to these Jewish leaders' charge against Him with a series of antithetical responses. These contrasts point to the error of their beliefs.

**The accusation of the Pharisees (12:22-24)**

This passage begins with the healing of a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute (12:22). Healing a man unable to see or speak would be dramatic evidence of Christ's powerful authority over demons and affliction. This man would have been known to many, which left the crowds in awe (12:23).

This led the people to ponder the possibility that Jesus was the Son of David, a clearly understood messianic term (Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9; 22:42). The Greek text indicates an expected negative response to this wonderment. The people were only postulating the mere possibility of Christ as the Messiah, far short of a statement of belief. The crowd recognized the supernatural nature of this healing but were preconditioned to view the coming Messiah as a conquering king rather than a humble servant. The influence of the Pharisees certainly did not assist the crowds to seriously consider their Messiah.

Matthew includes this miracle as the background for the conflict between Christ and the Pharisees. Neither Matthew nor Luke (Luke 11:14) expand upon the miracle, although Matthew adds that fact of the man's blindness being healed. It was the confrontation that this miracle produced that was the focus of the Gospel writers.

Jesus had previously healed the blind and the mute but this account is the first healing of someone both blind and mute. The previous occasion of a mute demon-possessed man being healed also produced amazement from the crowds, “As they were going out, a mute, demon-possessed man was brought to Him. After the demon was cast out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed, and were saying, ‘Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel!’” (Matthew 9:32-35).

In that previous instance of such a healing, the Pharisees also responded with this same rejection of His miracle. “But the Pharisees were saying, ‘He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons’” (Matthew 9:34). In Matthew 12:24, the Pharisees identify the ruler of the demons as Beelzebul and include that His power “only” is derived from the ruler of the demons. Jesus earlier spoke of Beelzebul in Matthew 10:25.

The reference to Beelzebul is somewhat unclear. It may refer to the god worshiped by the Philistines in 2 Kings 1:2-3, 5, 16. The term “baal” was a Canaanite term for their deity and used in this conjunction may mean “lord of the house” or even potentially, “lord of the flies” or “prince baal.” Opinions vary but it is clear that the term meant “*ruler of the demons*” to the Jews of the first century. As such this would be a reference to Satan, as Jesus made clear in Matthew 12:26.

The Pharisees’ repeated evil of ascribing the miracles of Jesus to the power of Satan (Matthew 9:34, cf. 10:25) led to a final conclusion to their unbelief.

### **The answer from Jesus (12:25-37)**

Jesus responds to the Pharisees by “*knowing their thoughts.*” This knowledge obviously could have been understood supernaturally, but it could also have been expected that Jesus was well aware of the perspectives of the Pharisees by simply analyzing their words and actions. He then responded to them by first refuting their claim based upon the inherent inconsistency in it and by secondly refuting their claim based upon the reality of the miracle.

#### **1. Why the Pharisees were in error (12:25-27)**

The basic principle of the damage that division produces shows the fallacy of the reasoning of the Pharisees. When there is division of any country, city or home, there is an inevitable demise. No one seeking to further any cause would be acting against the very cause they would desire to advance (Matthew 12:25).

This simple logic is then applied by Jesus to their specific claim that this miracle of casting out the demon is done by the power of the ruler of the demons. *“If Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself,”* proving the foolishness of their claim. Satan would not act against his own kingdom. This kingdom is a temporal reign in this present age (1 John 5:19) that will ultimately fall into eternal destruction in the lake of fire and brimstone (Revelation 20:7-10).

Jesus' second refutation involved the practice of the Jewish followers of the Pharisees. Acts 19:13-14 indicates that certain unbelieving Jewish exorcists had some engagement with cast out demons. Certainly, they did not have the power over demons that Christ possessed, which is why the crowds responded with amazement in verse 23. The Jewish exorcists did nothing like the works that Christ performed.

The Pharisees appeared to view their sons as casting out demons and Jesus made his argument based upon their understanding. The Pharisees would have to agree that if these Jews were also casting out demons, it would be by the power of Satan, which is something they would never admit.

## 2. Why Jesus' miracles were true (12:28-30)

First and foremost, the miracle of casting the demon from this man was by the power of the Spirit of God because the kingdom of God had come near to them through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The contrast here is between the Spirit of God and Beelzebul.

Matthew described the power of the Spirit of God upon Jesus a few verses earlier, *“Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him”* (Matthew 12:18). The Spirit of God came upon Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:16). The Spirit of God empowered Christ and they should have understood the kingdom of God had come upon them and received their Messiah.

By saying *“the kingdom of God has come upon you,”* Jesus did not intend that the kingdom was spiritually entering the people of Israel, for rather He spoke of people entering the kingdom, not the kingdom entering them. The kingdom of God had come to them because the Messiah was in their midst, with the power of the Spirit of God.

Matthew 12:29 confirms the authority of Christ over Satan. Only a stronger person can plunder the house of another (cf. Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-22). He obviously is referencing His ability to cast out demons, which is spiritually spoiling the domain of Satan. The strong man (Satan) will be bound for a thousand years when Christ returns with the kingdom of God (Revelation 20:2).

Those who use this verse to teach that Satan was bound at Christ's first coming overlook the fact that Satan is not bound in the church age.

*"Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil"* (Ephesians 6:11).

*"Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you"* (James 4:7; cf. Ephesians 4:27).

*"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8; cf. 1 Timothy 3:7).

*"We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one"* (1 John 5:19).

In justification, we are delivered from the domain of Satan by God's grace and through our faith (Acts 26:18). We are no longer children of the devil but are children of God (John 1:12; 8:44). In this sense, believers have escaped the power of the devil for *"You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4).

This understanding of Christ's domain over people who are being delivered through the power of God over Satan leads to Matthew 12:30, *"He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters."* Christ came to save the world, *"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him"* (John 3:17).

This analogy of gathering versus scattering fits better with the practice of ranching than it does with farming. Christ is gathering those unto salvation, like a shepherd gathers sheep. *"I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd"* (John 10:16).

Those who do not join Him in this task are, by default, scattering. This was directed at the Pharisees but was a warning to the crowds. The people were being scattered away from God by their leaders and if they do not follow Jesus, they too will be guilty of scattering people away from God. There is no place for neutrality in regard to the Son of God. If we are not with Him, we are against Him and are therefore working against His interests.

The inverse to Matthew 12:30, "*he who is not against you is for you*" (Luke 9:50; cf. Mark 9:40) is not a contradiction because the pronouns are different. In Matthew 12:30, Jesus is speaking of Himself, and in Luke 9:50 and Mark 9:40, He is speaking of the disciples. When Jesus is speaking of Himself, He makes clear that there is no middle ground between the commitment to Christ and the opposition to Christ.

However, with regard to Christ's followers, if people are not opposing us, then we ought to consider them for us. There is a fundamental difference between whether people align themselves with us and whether people align themselves with Christ. We should be satisfied when people do not oppose us in our service to the Lord, for then our ministry can move forward unhindered.

### 3. Why blasphemy against the Spirit is unforgivable (12:31-32)

Matthew 12:31-32 involves two verses of restated parallels. These are two antithetical couplets intended to emphasize the same concept. Specifically, words spoken against Christ are forgivable but what is spoken against the Holy Spirit is not forgivable.

Blasphemy is the speaking evil against God. This phrasing in verse 32 equates speaking against the Son of Man as blasphemy as it parallels verse 31. This implies the deity of Christ as well as the deity of the Holy Spirit.

The distinction between any sin being forgivable except the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit has perplexed many. People have considered the unpardonable sin to be the rejection of Christ.

While the rejection of Christ would seem to be unforgivable, the text appears to allow for a future change of mind after one speaks against the Son of Man. While we know one must believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin, this does not preclude belief at a time after one would speak against the Son of Man.

Variations of this perspective include people rejecting the gospel when preached, people lapsing into the sin of unbelief after their profession of Christ, and people falling into moral failure. However, Matthew 12:31 clearly states that any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven outside of the specific sin of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Also, according to verse 32, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not speaking against the Son of Man. This leads to the rejection of the views that see the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit equal to the denial of Christ.

The context of Matthew 12:31-32 is the claim of the Pharisees that Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of the demons. Jesus says that He “*cast out demons by the Spirit of God*” (Matthew 12:28). His miracle was in the power of the Holy Spirit. To ascribe the works of the Holy Spirit to demons was what Christ meant by “*speaking against the Holy Spirit.*” Anyone who had personal, eye-witness evidence of the Spirit of God through the works of Jesus and concluded this was the power of Satan was committing the unpardonable sin. It is unpardonable not because of the unwillingness of God to be merciful but because there is no greater revelation than these miracles of God among them.

Why would the same forgiveness not also extend to a person who speaks against the Holy Spirit only to later come to a change of heart and mind? To understand this, we must understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the means by which people come to faith. The Spirit of God “*will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment*” (John 16:8; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14; 12:13). The rejection of the revelation by the Holy Spirit is unforgivable because there is no further revelation that will be provided by God (cf. Luke 16:31).

Furthermore, if the Holy Spirit does not move to draw a person to God, there is no forgiveness. Jesus said, “*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day*” (John 6:44). The Holy Spirit is the means by which the Father draws people to Himself. To conclude the Spirit’s work is the work of the devil is final evidence of one’s lost condition.

#### 4. Why our words reveal our true character (12:33-37)

In Matthew 12:33, Jesus again uses the analogy of a good tree producing good fruit and a bad tree producing bad fruit. He employed this same analogy to describe false prophets in Matthew 7:15-19. John the Baptist used this analogy as the evidence of true repentance (Matthew 3:8-10). In each case, the point is that conduct reflects the reality of one’s true nature.

This follows calling the miracles of Jesus the work of Satan. Certainly, Jesus was the good tree and was bearing good fruit. The healing of the blind and mute man was certainly good and yet it was being called bad by the Pharisees. Those who saw the good fruit were obligated to conclude that it came from a good source.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees by the phrase “brood of vipers” in verse 34. Earlier, John the Baptist called them this in Matthew 3:7, and later, Jesus would call them this in Matthew 23:33. This description portrays the Pharisees as a group of destructive, deadly creatures, poised to attack. The mission of the Pharisees was to attack the Messiah of Israel.

The illustration of the tree and the fruit is applied to one’s character and their words, for “*the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.*” There is a direct correspondence between what we say and who we are. The Pharisees were the worthless tree, an evil treasure, bringing forth evil. Jesus was the righteous tree, a good treasure, bringing forth good. Their blasphemy reflected their corrupt belief.

Since our words reflect our heart, every careless, useless, empty word that people speak will demand an explanation on the day of judgment. This should not cause true believers, with a sincere desire to do the will of God, consternation. The empty words in this context are the words of the Pharisees who spoke against the Son of Man (Matthew 12:32).

Words mean things and God knows all our words. God also knows our heart and our words reveal our heart. If God knows our heart, and if our words reflect our heart, then we ought to be concerned about our right heart more than our right words.

The day of judgment refers to the final judgment of the unbelievers (Matthew 10:15; Matthew 11:22-24). The evil man who has brought out of his evil treasure what is evil will give an account for their evil words on the day of judgment. Believers will have their works tested in the judgment of the believers for the reward that will be received (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15). The saved will not be judged for their sinful words that have been forgiven by the grace of our Lord, for “*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

The concluding statement in verse 37 not only regards words that condemn but also words that justify. The true followers of Christ will reveal themselves through their words which glorify the Lord. Those who are against Him will be condemned by their words that reveal their heart.

This should bring encouragement and confidence in our faith, rather than fear that we are in danger of falling away from the Lord. No one is without sin in their words, *“For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man”* (James 3:2). Yet our confession of Christ with our words provides evidence of our sincere faith, *“that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation”* (Romans 10:9-10).

### **Conclusion**

Mankind falls into one of two categories, either we are with Christ, or we are against Him. If we have faith in Christ, we are with Him, desiring His glory. This is far from calling Christ’s miraculous work as the work of the devil. Faith in Christ will manifest itself by our words that exalt the Lord according to His will. We should desire to express glory to Jesus Christ for all His great and wondrous deeds!