

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS COME UPON YOU

Matthew 12:22-29

The opposition to Jesus reached its height in Matthew 12:14 when the religious leaders decided to kill Him. So they began to look for any opportunity to accuse Him. In Matthew 12:22-29, Jesus is accused of collusion with the devil. Let's read this passage.

Matthew 12:22. Then there was brought to Him a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw.

23 And all the multitudes were amazed, and began to say, "This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."

25 And knowing their thoughts He said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand.

26 "And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand?

27 "And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently they shall be your judges.

28 "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 "Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house.

The enemy

This whole passage centers on Jesus' enemy, Satan. The word Satan is a transliteration of the Hebrew word which means 'enemy' or 'adversary'. In the Greek language, Satan is called *diabolos* which is transliterated in English as 'devil'.

The reality of Satan cannot be ignored. He is the enemy of our souls, a dreadful and powerful enemy. If it were not for the power of Jesus' blood, no one would stand a chance against him. Satan is a being of tremendous power and intelligence who deserves a lot of respect. If you are a Christian, if Christ dwells in you, you don't need to fear the devil but you will respect his power. In any kind of warfare, there are two things you must know very well. You must know the enemy and you must know yourself. More specifically, you must know the strength of your enemy and you must know your own weaknesses. If you know these two things, you can anticipate where the attacks of the enemy are most likely to come from.

Satan and his demons can affect us in many ways. For example, here in v. 22, we find that there is a person who was blind and dumb because of the power of the enemy. We are told that this

man was demon-possessed. Demons are spirits that are capable of entering and controlling both men and animals, and we know that they can inflict physical diseases. It is clear in this passage that the underlying cause of this man's physical problem is understood to be demonic. But of course, the word of God does not ascribe all illnesses to demons. Many sick persons in the Bible have a purely organic illness, i.e., it has a natural cause. In John 9 for example, the person who was blind was not demon-possessed. He was simply born with a physical defect that made him blind. Similarly, the sick man waiting beside the pool in John 5 is not said to be crippled because of demonic possession. Some physical illnesses arise from the flesh, but most of them have natural explanations.

Here in Matthew 12:22, the linking of demon-possession with a physical ailment is obvious. And when Jesus cast out the demon, the man was able to see and to speak. The miracle caused a reaction. People were so amazed by this healing that they started to ask if Jesus could be the Son of David, a question that suggests that they were trying to come to grips with Jesus' identity. The 'Son of David' was a royal title rooted in Nathan's prophecy to David that one of David's sons would be made a king forever (2Samuel 7). Ever since David, Israel was looking for the appearance of this eternal Son of David.

By Satan's power?

People wondered in hope, 'Can this be the Son of David? Is He the Messiah, the promised king who is going to save Israel?' They thought that He might be the promised Savior. Yet they were not quite sure. They couldn't be totally certain because He was not exactly the Messiah that they were expecting. He seemed to have no concern for political and national affairs. Nobody saw Him mobilizing an army or leading an uprising against the Romans as the Son of David. They were puzzled by the fact that He was proclaiming a message of personal salvation instead of national deliverance. 'He cannot be the Son of David, can He?' This question leaves open the possibility that it may be 'Yes'. They wanted to believe but they were not too sure.

The Pharisees were sure that Jesus could not be the Son of David. Or more accurately, they refused to believe that Jesus could be the Messiah. There will always be people who cling to their unbelief despite the evidence. Here the Pharisees could not deny the reality of Jesus' power. The man who was blind and mute can now see and speak because of Jesus' intervention. How is the healing of this man to be explained? The Pharisees have this answer: Jesus casts out demons only by Beelzebul. In other words, they attributed the healing and the exorcism to the power of Beelzebul, the prince of the demons, that is, Satan. Their reaction is easy to understand. If a person refuses to see such power as coming from God, then this is the only alternative to those who see supernatural activity in the world. In order to keep themselves from having to confess Christ, the religious leaders alleged that the power behind Jesus is not divine but demonic.

The Pharisees' explanation is wrong but we must admit that it is not entirely false. What I mean is that the ability to exorcise or to perform miracle is not something unique to Christ. It is certainly true that Satan can heal miraculously. However he will heal in order to direct people's attention away from allegiance to Jesus. The Lord Jesus will teach for example in Matthew 24:24 that the devil can perform great signs and miracles to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. *For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.* Therefore we should always be on guard against mistakenly crediting every healing and every miracle to God. Some miracles, even when they appear beneficial, may be from the devil.

Now the truth of course is that Jesus' power is from God. He will respond to them in a parable that would reveal the absurdity of their charge. He says, 'Every kingdom that is divided against itself cannot stand. Don't you realize that? If I really cast out demons by Beelzebul, then Satan would be casting out Satan, which means that he would be destroying himself. How is that possible? His kingdom would be doomed!'

The unasked question is whether Satan would do this to himself. And the implied answer is, ‘Of course not! Satan cannot drive out his own people.’ If that were true, it would mean that there is civil war in the kingdom of evil. And civil war at any level, even among spiritual beings, is counterproductive and devastating. No king would throw his soldiers out of his kingdom. In the same way, Satan would not throw his soldiers otherwise his kingdom would collapse. How can Satan have a standing kingdom if he is working against himself? The logical conclusion that we can draw from this is that Jesus’ power cannot be from Beelzebul because it is impossible for the ruler of the demons to cast out his own demons.

Inconsistent accusation

Then in v. 27, the Lord Jesus moves from the lack of logic in their response to its implication. And the implication can be summarized in this way: If what Jesus does is by Satan’s power, then what does that say about the same things their ‘sons’ do? Jesus’ argument assumes that Jewish exorcism was real and effective, and that it was acceptable to the Pharisees, that is, Jewish exorcists did not exorcise by Beelzebul. In the first century, it was common for Jews to profess to cast out demons. It was actually a thriving business. The historian Josephus writes about Jews who traveled through the land to exorcise demons. In Acts 19:13, we read of Jewish exorcists who went from place to place using the name of Jesus in a magical way.

And here Jesus was saying, ‘If it is true that I cast out demons by the authority of Satan, then those of your own group who claim to drive out demons must also be using Satan’s power.’ The point is that whatever the Pharisees say about Jesus, they must accept it for anyone else who does the same thing. If Jesus exorcises by Satan, then so do other exorcists. If you say that Jewish exorcists cast out demons by God’s power, then you must say the same thing of Jesus. It is one or the other.

We should not imagine that a Christian cannot be rational when he thinks spiritually. It is true that we do not rely purely on human reasoning. But a redeemed person should also have his thinking redeemed, and that does not exclude the use of logic.

So Jesus’ response is very clear: The Pharisees’ accusation against Christ is inconsistent and illogical. They cannot ascribe His works of power to Satan, and not so to ascribe those of the Jewish exorcists. ‘If exorcism is accepted in our Jewish society, why should My practice of it be suspect?’

The arrival of the kingdom of God

After refuting the Pharisees’ charge, Jesus draws a conclusion from the two arguments that He presented. *But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, **then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*** If Satan would not work against his own followers and if Jewish exorcism is acceptable, then there is no reason to suppose that Jesus’ power is derived from an evil source. If He does not cast out by Satan, He must therefore be casting out by the power of God. And by driving out demons by the power of God, He shows that the kingdom of God has come to Israel. Thus Jesus claims the coming, in His ministry, of that to which the OT had looked forward: The kingdom of God. This is the central point of the passage and the evidence of its arrival is seen in Jesus’ works – exorcism being only one example.

‘If I have the power of God, then I am bringing to you the kingdom of God. Wherever the power of God is active, there is the kingdom of God. It is a power that brings about the rule and the reign of God. Therefore in this day and age, the kingdom of God has come to you. The power of evil is now being cast out.’

This kingdom of God, what does its current form involve? We can say that the kingdom of God comes in two phases. We might call the first phase the ‘invisible kingdom’ and the second one, the ‘visible kingdom.’

The initial phase of the kingdom is invisible because it is expressed in the ministry of the Spirit during the time of Jesus’ physical absence from the earth. This is the kingdom that Jesus says is arriving now and that is demonstrated in his work of exorcism. Jesus is not right now present for all to see but His authority is present in His followers. He rules through the benefits – especially the forgiveness of sins and the power to live the new life – that He gives to those who come to Him. Human beings are now able to live as God would desire because they are empowered by His Spirit. The presence of God’s rule becomes evident in the lives of this group of transformed people even though Jesus is not physically visible.

This is not all there is to the kingdom in God’s plan. All the OT promises will be completely fulfilled only when Jesus comes back to exercise dominion and judgment over the earth. At His return, Jesus’ rule will be made visible by His physical presence. That is why we say that it is a ‘visible kingdom.’ This will be the second phase of the kingdom program.

Christ has overcome Satan

In v. 29, the Lord Jesus strengthens His argument that His casting out of demons could not be by Satan. He says that a strong man has to be bound before His property can be taken. Satan is this strong man who is guarding his possessions. He is a powerful person but he is defeated by Someone stronger. Jesus is the stronger man who enters Satan’s house to take his goods. The goods here most likely represent the people under Satan’s power. So Jesus is entering the ‘evil house’ to free those who are imprisoned by Satan. This illustration echoes the words of Acts 26:18 where Jesus says that He is turning men ‘from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sin.’

Notice that Satan is described as a person and not as some kind of thing. Evil has no existence by itself and good has no existence by itself either. We cannot point to something and say, ‘Here is a piece of evil.’ Good and evil have no existence apart from persons. Unless there are people or beings who are good or evil, there would be neither good nor evil.

We can understand why the Bible declares that only God is good (Matthew 19:17). All goodness has its existence in God. He is the embodiment of goodness. Without Him, there would be no goodness to talk about.

In the same way, the Bible tells us that Satan is the very embodiment of evil, the grand adversary of God and man. He reigns in the world as in his house. As a strong man armed, he has taken possession of the souls of men. Jesus says that the only way you can set people free is by binding Satan. He cannot be overcome by any man. However this picture of war gives us hope because it tells us that Jesus has already overrun Satan. In Colossians 1:13, Paul says that God *delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.*

When did Jesus invade Satan’s house and bind him? We can say that this came gradually. Satan was bound to a certain extent during Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. For the first time, Satan confronted someone whom he could not lead away from God. After the wilderness experience, he began to see the binding that was to come.

Satan was bound even more as he confronted Jesus throughout His life with temptation after temptation. Every time, Jesus resisted the temptations, conquering and binding Satan more and more each time.

Satan was bound dramatically in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was tempted to take another route than the cross, yet He obeyed God perfectly.

Satan was bound in a complete sense at the cross. Christ was the perfect sacrifice who could stand for and embrace all men who would obey God. Satan's house of evil was broken at Calvary.

And finally, Satan will be bound forever at the end of time. A new world will be established in perfection, without Satan carrying on his evil work. This is described in Revelation 20:2ff.

Now, although Satan was judged and bound at the cross, it doesn't mean that we don't have to worry about him anymore. He is still permitted to carry on the struggle against God and to exercise his power over men by seducing them to evil and their ruin. In fact, behind this illustration of a divided house is the assumption that Satan is out to destroy mankind. The parable assumes that Satan is active and that he is a dangerous ruler in the world. Remember, he is described as strong man, fully armed (Luke 11:21), able to cause tremendous damage. Peter says that he prowls the earth like a roaring lion 'looking for someone to devour' (1Peter 5:8). The word 'devour' is the same word used to describe how the Red Sea swallowed up the Egyptians when they were pursuing Israel (Hebrews 11:29). It paints a vivid picture of Satan's destructive activity in the world.

The Christian is called to resist the devil (James 4:7). He can successfully fight him in the strength and power of God because he has the Stronger Man, Christ, on his side. God is in control. The believer's victory is sure.

Summary

Let us summarize this lesson. When Jesus performs a miracle, His purpose is not to entertain people. Matthew 12:22-29 shows how Jesus' exorcism forced people to make up their mind about who He is and where His power comes from. It is either Satan's power or God's power. Jesus argues that the first option is logically impossible. If we say that the source of His power is satanic, we also have to say that Satan is working to destroy himself – an impossible situation. In addition, if we are consistent, this means that exorcism by others is done by Satan's power. Is this how Jewish exorcism is to be explained? No Jewish religious leader would say that. This leaves the other option: Jesus works by God's power. If He is able to heal the blind and mute man by driving out a demon, it means that satanic forces are overcome by Him. This demonstrates that the kingdom of God had begun.

Jesus wants to make sure that no one misses the kingdom of God. He is ushering the kingdom in, but we have to make the decision to accept it. In our next lesson, we will learn that it is impossible to know about the arrival of this new age and remain neutral indefinitely. We have to decide whether we are with Jesus or against Jesus (which is equivalent to being on Satan's side).