

Caught in a Cosmic Struggle

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[0 : 0 0] Hi friends, I want to begin today by giving you some quotations from a famous person. I want you to count how many quotations I give before you recognise the person that spoke them.

They're all from the same person, spread over some years. I'll start with the more obscure ones and then I'll move to some of the more well-known ones. You might like to tell me later on when you got the first, when you worked out who it was. Anyway, here we go. Here's the first.

First, I'm ready to meet my maker. Whether my maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter. Well done. First off. Now for the second, if you're going through hell, keep going.

Now for the third, there are two things that are more difficult than making an after-dinner speech. Climbing a wall which is leaning towards you and kissing a girl who's leaning away from you. Now for the fourth, a lady came up to me one day and said, sir, you are drunk. To which I replied, I am drunk and today, madam, and tomorrow I shall be sober. But you will still be ugly.

Now for the fifth, show me a young conservative and I'll show you someone with no heart. Show me an old liberal and I'll show you someone with no brains. Now if you haven't worked out the speaker as yet, we've already had it announced.

[1 : 2 7] You'll know it from this one anyway. There's two people communicating. The first is Lady Astor and she says to our speaker these words. Winston, if I were your wife, I'd put poison in your coffee.

And Winston Churchill replies, Nancy, if I were your husband, I'd drink it. Friends, words are incredibly powerful, aren't they?

My life and your life have been shaped by words. People have spoken words into our lives, haven't they? And they might have hurt. They might have built up.

They might have wounded. They might have healed. They might have brought laughter. They might have brought tears. They might have left scars. They might have scars. Friends, words are immensely powerful.

And in many ways, I think that our passage today is in its essence a passage about words and their power. So I want you to store that up because at the end, I'm going to sort of come back to that theme.

[2 : 3 0] I want you to keep your eyes and your ears open. And as I go through this passage, I want you to see if you can pick up the allusions to words and the language of words.

So open your Bibles, please, at Matthew 12. It's page 977. I'd encourage you to have the passage open, although I'm going to start at Matthew 3. If you wanted to go there, you could.

In our passage today, you see, the passage we come at today from Matthew 12 doesn't just come out of the blue. It's been part and parcel of a theme that has been brewing for ages.

Matthew has highlighted it for us, and it goes back as far as Matthew chapter 3. I mentioned it last week, but I need to highlight it this week. If you look at Matthew 3 and verses 7 to 17, you'll notice something.

Here we see John the Baptist exercising his ministry. In the process, he speaks to the leaders of Israel, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and he calls them openly a brood of vipers.

[3 : 28] And he says, look, you cannot simply rely on finding your security in the fact that you are children of Abraham. He tells them that judgment is coming to them if they don't bear fruit in keeping with their calling.

With that context in mind, Jesus comes to be baptized. And there's a strong contrast between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, because as he comes out of the water, it is not John who speaks, but God who speaks.

And the words that come are not words of judgment, but words of endorsement. You see, he comes out of the water. Heaven is open. The Spirit of God descends on him as a dove. And God says, this is my son, whom I love.

With him, I am well pleased. Clearly, God is siding with Jesus, not with the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Jesus, you see, comes from him.

He comes in fulfillment of God's plans announced in Scripture. He is God's son, whom God loves. God is well pleased with him. Now, flip in your Bibles to chapter 9, verses 32 to 34.

[4 : 37] There we come across a man who's demon-possessed and mute. And Jesus drives the demon out of him, and the mute man speaks. And the crowd is amazed, and they say, nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.

But then in verse 34 of the same chapter, the Pharisees intervene. And they, having seen this proclaim, it is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.

You see, at this stage, the Pharisees have stepped things up a bit. They are claiming that the source of the power of Jesus is not the Spirit of God. In effect, they are disputing what happened at his baptism where he was given God's Spirit.

They are disputing with God, who proclaimed Jesus to be his son, in whom he is well pleased. That's incident number two. Third comes in chapter 10.

And the preceding incident has clearly rested in the mind of Jesus. And so he's instructing his disciples in their mission to Israel. And he says to his disciples, you ought to be like me.

[5 : 40] And if you're like me, your teacher, and they called me someone who was under the control of Beelzebub, then they'll do the same for you.

In verse 26, he tells them, don't be afraid, though, of such people. After all, there's nothing concealed that will not be disclosed. There's nothing hidden that will not be made known. In other words, the truth of the source of my power and yours will become apparent in time.

Then we get to Matthew chapter 12, verse 14. Remember, we were there a couple of weeks ago, and the conflict with the Pharisees has escalated again. It stepped up over controversy over the Sabbath.

And it ended up where the Pharisees went out from their synagogue to plot the end of Jesus. Jesus himself went out of the synagogue, but he withdrew from their presence to the public eye of others and did good.

Then Matthew stepped in and gave us God's perspective last week, didn't he? Where he quoted Isaiah chapter 42, telling us what God thought. And where the Pharisees had accused Jesus of being under the control of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, God speaks through Isaiah and reminds us of what he said at the baptism of Jesus.

[6 : 53] God, through his word, declares that the source and power and authority of Jesus is God himself. Jesus bears God's spirit. Therefore, the spirit is behind his actions and behind his words.

You see, this controversy between the Pharisees and God will dominate our passage today. And again, the Pharisees will repeat their charge.

Verse 24 contains it. They will declare that it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons. So Jesus is going to engage with them on the basis of that.

He's going to do so poignantly, pointedly and powerfully. He's going to defend himself. Let's see what happens. You remember that earlier passage from chapter nine.

They'd accused him of driving out demons or being under the influence of evil spirits that are healed by a demoniac. This time, the demoniac is blind and mute.

[7 : 54] And under the control of a demon. Now, look at the response of the people. Last time they said nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. This time they're astonished. Verse 23. And our translation has them saying, could this be the son of David?

Actually, the NIV is not as helpful here as it might be because the original language expects a negative response. So a better translation would be something like this.

This couldn't be the son of David, could it? Or this man isn't the son of David, is he? The awe of chapter nine has now shifted.

Can you see that? There is doubt now entering into their response. Perhaps the increased presence and conflict with the Pharisees is beginning to take its toll on the crowd.

They are beginning to have doubts about Jesus. Then in verse 24, the Pharisees hear and themselves respond with those words we've seen before. It's only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.

[8 : 54] Now, when the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons in chapter nine, Jesus didn't do anything. Since then, we've heard God's perspective from Isaiah 42.

God regards Jesus bearing his spirit. But however, here we hear that Jesus knows the thoughts of the Pharisees and does respond.

I wonder whether he responds perhaps because the crowds are beginning to be sucked in by the Pharisees. And his response has a number of parts. Let's see if we can work out the logic of it. First, he makes an observation and then he asks a rhetorical question.

Can you see the observation? Verse 26. Jesus says, if Satan drives out Satan, he himself is divided against himself. Then he poses the rhetorical question.

How then can his kingdom stand? You can see the logic, can't you? He's saying, it is contrary to experience that any power should set itself against itself.

[9 : 55] You see, kingdoms need unity, don't they? They don't work on fostering disunity. A power that sets itself against itself will in the end not be able to stand.

It will divide. Therefore, if Satan is driving out Satan, his kingdom has got no future. The argument of the Pharisees is illogical.

Contrary to experience makes no sense. It should be recognized for what it is and discarded. Then in verse 27, Jesus asks another rhetorical question.

It follows on from the first. You see, the Pharisees themselves practiced exorcism. And so he asked the Pharisees this question. If I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?

Now, there's two answers, I guess, when you think about it. The first answer would be from the Pharisees might be this. You drive them out by Beelzebul, but our exorcists drive them out by the true and living God.

[10 : 57] I think that might be one fair response, wouldn't it? If Beelzebul's desire is to have people under his power, then that makes absolutely no sense, does it?

It implies that Beelzebul has sided with God and is working toward freedom from his rule and the triumph of God. The alternative response, though, that the Pharisees might have would be to say both are driving out demons by the same source.

Now, that makes no sense either. Jesus already argued against that. It would imply that Satan is divided amongst himself. So there's really only one conclusion that is possible. Demons leave only when a more powerful antagonistic force, that is, a divine force, causes them to do so.

The Pharisees' argument that they put forward that Jesus is driving out demons by the prince of demons should be abandoned. That's what Jesus is saying. Notice the conclusion he makes, verse 28.

He presumes the Pharisees have followed his logic and sees the illogical nature of their own position and he pushes it home to them. He says, but if it's by the spirit of God that I cast drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

[12 : 14] Now, the point he's making is very powerful. The same Holy Spirit who came upon him at his baptism is at work in his ministry. He's the bearer of that spirit.

He's doing exorcisms and healings in the power of that spirit. And the Pharisees should wake up to it and stop opposing him. They should recognize that the kingdom is present in him. Of course, when you think about this, there is possibly a little barb in what he's saying, isn't there?

You see, if God's kingdom is present in his ministry, then opposing God's kingdom would be a risky business to engage in, wouldn't it? It might come upon them in a way that is not wanted and not very pleasant.

That's the first thing that John the Baptist warned about back in chapter three. He said, the axe is laid at the root of your trees. You're a brood of vipers.

Expect the day might come. In verse 30, Jesus reiterates the force of his argument. He is the strong man, he says, under the power of God's Holy Spirit, tying up the strong man, carrying off his possessions and plundering his house.

[13 : 25] Friends, it's helpful for us to just stand back a little bit to grasp the point of what's going on here. You see, the questions being posed by the Pharisees are not insignificant, are they?

They are looking at Jesus. They are seeking the source of what he does, as they rightly ought to. And seeking the source of his deeds is not just a matter of idle curiosity.

It's a matter of huge significance. The Pharisees might make up their mind between two possibilities. The Pharisees knew, you see, that the source of the power of Jesus was either from God or not from God.

And if his source was from God, then everything else in his ministry was God. His claim to Messiahship. His welcoming of sinners and outcasts.

His turning upside down their world. His understanding of God. The question posed by Jesus in verse 28 is very serious indeed. If they were right and he were wrong, then he was a very wicked man indeed in league with the devil.

[14 : 31] But if he were right and they were wrong, then the kingdom of God they believed in had come upon them and they were on the wrong side.

Friends, as readers of this ancient text, the same question faces us, I think. It is not a question of idle curiosity reading the Gospels. If the source behind Jesus and his deeds is satanic, we must reject him.

But if the source behind him and his deeds is God, then rejecting him would leave us on the wrong side of God. If it is by the spirit of God that he does what he does, then the implications are devastating.

It means the kingdom of God is present in him. It also means that if you resist and oppose him, then you resist and oppose God.

So it is a very profound question posed by the Pharisees. And Matthew is in no doubt as to whether where the weight lies.

[15 : 34] The quotation from Isaiah that he stops and recites a few verses earlier makes it clear. This is God's son on whom God's spirit rests and in whom God is well pleased.

His name alone is the name in which the nations can hope. Friends, as you listen today, you must make this choice. What will you do with this man?

What will you do with his claims? They are profound. They are earth shattering. They are ultimate questions and ultimate claims. And if Jesus is who he says he is, then in him God's kingdom has invaded the world and everything changes.

With that in mind, look at verse 30. Jesus moves from defense to offense. His point is potent. Whoever is not with me is against me.

And whoever does not gather with me scatters. The Pharisees and us must make a choice. It is a choice upon which much depends. It is not a matter of idle curiosity.

[16 : 38] As I've said, the presence of Jesus in the world elicits a response. We are either with him or against him. And he makes clear that if it is the latter and who he is, who he says he will be, then we will be scattered.

We will be devastated. For the kingdom of God has both a positive and a negative impact according to how we respond to it. Let's now move to verses 31 and 32. Jesus says, and so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the spirit will not be forgiven.

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. It's clear that he's having a go at the Pharisees.

They're speaking against the role of the spirit in his life. Now, history records that people have found these verses very troublesome. And perhaps in your life, you've thought, have I done this at some point in my life?

Am I in trouble? They are disturbing verses, but we need to understand them correctly. Lest we misapply them. Remember the context. The question is, what is the source behind the deeds and words of Jesus?

[17 : 54] Jesus claims I'm doing them by the spirit of God. God, Isaiah, the nature of the deeds themselves indicate that that is true. The spirit of God is upon Jesus.

It is by the spirit of the living God that he drives out demons. But the Pharisees are saying, no. They say this spirit by which he drives out demons is not the spirit of God.

Rather, it's sourced in Satan. Friends, if you ever look at the work of God, of the spirit of God and declare it to be devil's work, you will never be able to access God.

That makes sense, doesn't it? God himself has declared that his spirit is upon Jesus. So, while ever you look at his work through Jesus and declare it not to be his work, you will never have access to him.

Let me say it again. While ever you look at the work of the spirit of God and declare it to be devil's work, you will never have access to God.

[18 : 59] And God himself has declared that his spirit is upon his son. So, it's very easy to know whether or not you're committing this sin, this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

While ever you resist God's work in Jesus, you will be unforgiven. As long as you resist God's work in Jesus, you will never be able to be forgiven before God.

Because Jesus has only one means for forgiveness to come. And that is, sorry, God has only one means for forgiveness to come. That is through Jesus. The Pharisees are living proof of the truth that Jesus is declaring in this verse.

For as long as they say, Jesus is not operating by the spirit of God, they are guilty of an unforgivable sin because they can't believe in him. Therefore, they can't be forgiven.

They're cut off from God's only source of forgiveness. But were they to turn and recognize that his source is God's spirit, that he is from God and accept him, then they'll open themselves up to God and be able to be forgiven.

[20 : 09] It's very important we hear this. If you do not accept God's work in Jesus, you cannot be forgiven before God. There is only one means for forgiveness, only one way to be reconciled to God, and that is through Jesus.

Rejecting him, ignoring him, will leave you isolated from God, without God and without hope in the world. Let's look at verses 33 to 37. These, at first glance, look like a set of disparate statements and sayings.

However, I think there's a common theme in them. They are together about the power of words. Look at the background to verse 32. It talks about, oh, sorry, look at the background in verse 32.

It talks about the words we use. And he mentions speaking against the Son of Man or against the Holy Spirit. He says words have serious ramifications. Now look at verse 33. Jesus speaks of trees and fruit.

Now, the Pharisees have their roots, imagine them as trees, as it were. The Pharisees have their roots deep into untruth, don't they? Their hearts are deep into untruth.

[21 : 20] Therefore, the fruit that is going to issue from them and from their mouths will be foul and untruthful, as it is. Jesus agrees with John the Baptist.

They are a brood of vipers. And you know what vipers produce? Poison. And they're doing it. They are evil. Their hearts are evil. Therefore, their fruit is evil.

Therefore, what spews from their mouths is evil. Look at verse 35. Jesus says, 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 in him.

And eventually it'll come out of the mouth. The Pharisees have looked upon the work of God, opened their mouths, and declared it to be satanic. Out from their heart, through their lips, has come evil.

And so in this sense, their words will be the means by which they are judged. That's what verses 36 and 37 mean. And this notion is actually captured later on in the epistles by Paul.

[22 : 25] Listen to what he says. Romans 10, 9 and 10. If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Can you hear the synchronicity between mouth and heart? For it is with the heart you believe, and are justified, and it is with the mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Again, there's that synchronicity between the two. The mouth of the Pharisees, he espoused from their heart. It is full of accusing Jesus of being under the power of Satan.

The mouth of a Christian issues with something very different. It declares, Jesus is Lord. It shows what is in the heart. It shows a heart filled with belief in Jesus.

Can you hear this? Jesus is saying that the mouth reflects the heart. And in this sense, our mouths will reflect our fate. Our mouths will determine our destiny.

[23 : 26] With that background, look at 36 and 37. Jesus says, But I tell you, everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word that they have spoken. For by your words, you will be acquitted, and by your words, you will be condemned.

Now, I wonder if you noticed something about this passage. You see, I noticed it this morning at about 6 a.m. and was overwhelmed by it. This passage is full of those references and allusions to words.

The background to this passage is words. They are words spoken easily and often without thought. Pharisees, whose hearts appear to be filled with malice, utter words about the origin of Jesus.

They declare him to be under the control of the prince of demons. Those words grow in power as Matthew progresses. They sow seed, the seeds of doubt in people.

Then there's Jesus telling people not to tell others about him in verse 15. Fascinating. Then there's the word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah, a word about a servant whose voice will not be heard.

[24 : 33] Then there's the man in verse 22. He is a man with no voice, mute and unseeing. But Jesus gives him sight and speech. Then there's the words of the Pharisees, words loaded with references to the demonic.

Then there's the word of Jesus. Then words about speaking words against the son of man and the Holy Spirit. Then words about the mouth and the heart. Words about empty words, careless and loose words from Pharisees that begin to gain ground and change hearts.

Words from Jesus about words of quitting or condemning us. Friends, this is so strong all the way through this. Jesus is clear. Words shape things. God's word brought the world into existence.

God's word promised his Messiah. Human words undermine him, such as the words of the Pharisees. But more than that, his word shapes human existence.

And our words of response determine our destiny. Our response to him declared with words will either condemn or acquit us.

[25 : 47] Friends, I want to urge you today to think very carefully about what is in your heart. What's your attitude to Jesus? Who do you think that he is? What sort of fruit does it produce in your life?

And what sort of fruit does it produce from your lips? For by your words about him, you will be acquitted. And by your words about him, you will be condemned.

It's a hard passage, isn't it? We need to make sure we're not in the place of the Pharisees. But that our lips and our hearts are full of the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, as the Son of God, as the one in whom the Spirit dwells and who bears the Spirit of God.

Let's pray. Father, we pray for ourselves today. Please help us to think carefully about what is in our hearts and what our attitude to Jesus is.

And Father, please may our lips declare his greatness, his glory, his lordship. Father, you have warned us that by our words, we will be acquitted.

[27 : 04] And by our words about him, we will also be condemned. So please, Father, may our words be words filled with him and his lordship. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.