

Matthew 12:22-50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 12 verses 22 to 50 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strongman's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strongman?

Then indeed he may plunder his house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil?

[1 : 47] For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of the good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you. But he answered them, An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, So will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it.

For they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation, and condemn it.

[2 : 55] For she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, And behold, something greater than Solomon is here. When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.

Then it says, I will return to my house from which I came. And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there.

And the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation. While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.

But he replied to the man who told him, Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. In the second half of Matthew chapter 12, Jesus deals with the question of how he performs his exorcisms, and also with the issue of true membership of the people of God.

[4 : 09] The question of how Jesus casts out demons, and the claim that he does so by the power of Satan himself, is one that occurs on a number of occasions within the Gospel of Matthew.

And it's an important one. It's one that Jesus highlights elsewhere. It's important to consider how much of Jesus' ministry is focused upon direct conflict with Satan and demonic forces.

Jesus isn't just a teacher, or even a healer, or a miracle worker. He's an exorcist. He's someone who drives out evil spirits. Like David, who gave relief to Saul, who was troubled by an evil spirit after the Spirit of God left him.

So Jesus, as David's greater son, brings relief to the people of Israel, who are troubled by evil spirits. The Pharisees accuse him of acting in the power of Beelzebul, or Beelzebub, the lord of the flies, or maybe the lord of the garbage heap.

If this were the case, though, Jesus argues, Satan's kingdom would be doomed, as it would be divided against itself, seeking to cast out itself. And they aren't even consistent in their accusations, for if they were, they'd be accusing their own disciples and sons who cast out demons.

[5 : 20] Jesus seems to acknowledge here that there are others who are performing exorcisms. But his exorcisms seem to be operating on a different level. He is casting out by the Spirit of God, which is proof that the kingdom of God has come upon Israel.

He's conquering the oppressed land for God. Now, other exorcists seem to cast out demons using incantations, bizarre rituals, and other things along those lines.

Whereas Christ does so by his powerful and authoritative word. Something that's noted in the Gospels, that with a word he can cast out demons. It's his own authority that he's doing this with. It's not with some special trick, or some ritual that he has to perform. He has personal authority over the demonic realm. The demons recognise him and tremble.

Jesus binds the strong man, and as a result can plunder his house. In Luke chapter 11 verse 20, there's a reference to the finger of God in this same saying, which suggests that the story of the Exodus might be in the background here.

[6 : 21] As the Egyptian magicians speak about the plagues being performed by the finger of God, that they can't replicate them at a certain point. That is a sign that God is acting.

And likewise here, God is acting in Jesus Christ in a way that proves there's a new Exodus type event taking place. In this moment in history, things have narrowed to a point, and there are no places to stand on the sideline.

You can't be neutral. You're either for or against Christ, either gathering with him or scattering. And Jesus presents this alternative very clearly to people, that they don't have the opportunity to just stand back and be neutral.

In verses 31 and 32, Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And this is contrasted with speaking against the Son of Man. The best way of understanding this, I believe, is to read it against the background of redemptive history.

In Stephen's speech in the book of Acts, for instance, he speaks about two visitations, about Joseph when he first is rejected by his brothers, and then the second time when he brings them salvation, likewise with Moses.

[7 : 30] And the same is true of Christ. He first comes in humility in his earthly ministry. But then, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit is given to continue the ministry of Christ, to continue it in power in the ministry of the church.

However, if Israel reject not just Christ in his earthly ministry, but also the ministry of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit, they are not just blaspheming against the Son of Man, they're also blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

Or as we read in Hebrews chapter 6, they're crucifying Christ again. They crucified him once, now they are crucifying him again, in rejecting the ministry of the gospel through the church.

The Pharisees' rejection of Christ, and more particularly their accusation that he is acting by the power of Satan himself, is a manifestation of the state of their hearts. And it will be for this reason that they reject the ministry of the church too, when that comes along.

Bad trees cannot bear good fruit. They are a brood of vipers. And that image is that they are children of the great serpent, that they are the seed of the serpent, rather than the seed of the woman.

[8 : 37] Jesus draws particular attention to the relationship between the heart and the tongue. This is a common theme in the wisdom literature, for instance, in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere.

Speech manifests the heart. And the themes here might also relate to the healing and exorcism that has provoked this discourse in the first place. Jesus has healed a mute and blind man who was oppressed by a demon.

And it seems that the oppression of the demon prevented the man from seeing and from speaking. In a similar manner, the people who are accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul are displaying the failure of their faculties of speech and of perception as a result of their demonically oppressed hearts.

Some of the scribes and Pharisees then ask him for a sign. And Jesus refuses to give any sign apart from the sign of the prophet Jonah. And note the similarity with the challenge of Satan earlier on in chapter 4.

If you are the son of God, then do this great sign. Jesus declares them to be an evil and adulterous generation. And this recalls the language of Moses during the Exodus.

[9 : 44] In Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5. They have dealt corruptly with him. They are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation.

And again in verse 20 of that same chapter. They are a perverse generation. Children in whom there is no faithfulness. Why are they given the sign of Jonah?

Jesus, among other things, is declaring in advance what he is going to do in his death and resurrection. So that when it happens, it will be very clear that it was intended. As we read in John's Gospel on a number of occasions in particular.

Jesus said a number of things in his ministry that were not understood at the time. But afterwards they were understood to be confirmatory statements. That made clear that Christ knew all along what he was about to do.

Such sayings encouraged faith later on as they were brought to mind. Jonah's generation was described as adulterous. And Jonah was sent to the people of Nineveh.

[10 : 45] Among other reasons, as a sign of God's judgment of leaving Israel and going to the nations. Provoking Israel to jealousy by showing others mercy. The Israel of Jesus' day would experience the same thing.

The book of Jonah is also a sign to Israel of its own judgment of exile. But then its deliverance from that. There is a lot of symbolism in the book of Jonah. As Jonah's sin leads to the shaking up of the waters.

And trouble for the sailors on the boat. They have to cast Jonah into the sea. And then Jonah is swallowed by this big fish. As he prays to God in the belly of this big fish.

He is later vomited out on the land. And the second half of the book of Jonah, chapters 3 to 4, parallel the first two chapters in other ways. It is the story of two missions of Jonah, the dove. It's a story that brings to mind ark themes. Not just in the fact that it's two missions of a dove. But in other respects as well. God is preparing an ark for his people.

[11 : 46] In Nineveh itself. And the emphasis upon the cattle. And their involvement within all the events. The events of the fasting. That God is concerned for the cattle at the very end of the book.

And the way that Nineveh is described. The numbers associated with it. Suggest a connection between Noah's ark and Nineveh. God is preparing to cast his people into the sea.

They've caused upset in the region because of their sin. And they have to be cast into exile. But God is preparing a big fish of Nineveh to swallow them up.

And as they are swallowed up. If they pray to God in the belly of that big fish. They will be delivered. Likewise as we go through. We can see that the gourd that provides shade to Jonah.

Also represents the way that the rising kingdom of Assyria in the north. Provided shade from the Aramean kingdoms. And gave Israel the chance for its borders to expand.

[12 : 46] All of these are things that speak not just to a story of an individual prophet. But to the political situation of that day. And in the same way Christ is giving a message to his generation.

The Israel of Jesus' day would experience something very similar. It would also experience being cast out. Christ himself will be cast into the sea of the Gentiles.

But he will rise up. And Jesus' whole mission is a sign. He is the sign. The resurrection in particular confirms this. Jesus is not going to perform just a single great wonder to demonstrate his identity. His identity will be demonstrated by the full scope of his work. And the way that that work relates to the destiny of the people as a whole. Christ is the greater than Jonah.

But he is also the greater than Solomon. Whom the Queen of Sheba travelled to see. He is God's wisdom in person. Not just the wisest man as Solomon was. Rather he is God's wisdom come in human flesh.

[13 : 50] Note again that it is a Gentile being summoned as a witness against them. We've seen this in Tyre and Sidon. In Sodom and Gomorrah. And now with the Queen of Sheba. All these characters.

And the character of Jonah who goes to the people of Nineveh. And they repent. Whereas the people of Israel do not repent. In all of the witnesses being brought forth.

We're having some indication of the way that the story is heading. Christ drives demons out of Israel. To the wilderness. The place of the evil spirits. But if Israel does not fill the house of the nation with God's presence.

Things will become even worse for them. It's important to consider the fate of that generation. They were indeed possessed by more evil spirits than the first. And in the 60s.

In this outpouring of revolution and rebellion. And messianic fervor. They ended up leading to their destruction in AD 70. Their failure to respond appropriately to Jesus casting out of the earlier demons.

[14 : 53] Was in many ways part of what led to that crisis. Jesus' family wait outside wanting to speak to him. But Jesus makes clear that blood relations are secondary to.

And relativised by the bonds of the kingdom. His truest kinship is with the brotherhood of his disciples around him. Once again it's important to notice that this doesn't just pit these things against each other as opponents.

While they can be at direct odds with each other. As we see in some Jesus teaching in these contexts. There is also the fact that Jesus' family relations are largely taken up into.

And transformed within the life of the kingdom. Note for instance that Mary's blessing is not simply on account of some biological connection to Jesus. But because she received Christ.

Being conceived in her. In submission to the will of God. And believed that God would fulfil his word to her. Mary's blessing is not merely the fact that she bears Christ biologically.

[15 : 54] She's blessed as the archetypal believer. Not merely as the natural mother. We become as Christ's mother when we receive the word of the Lord like Mary did.

And we become as Christ's brothers and sisters as we follow him. And are faithful to the will of God as he is. A question to consider. How can the shared life of the kingdom of God.

Transform the way that we relate to the believing members of our own families.