

# “The Kingdom Has Come upon You”

**Lesson Text:** Matthew 12:22–32 **Background Scripture:** Matthew 12:1–32

**Devotional Reading:** Deuteronomy 16:18–21; 17:8–13

## Matthew 12:22–32

<sup>22</sup> Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. <sup>23</sup> All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”

<sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” <sup>25</sup> Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. <sup>26</sup> If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup> And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. <sup>29</sup> “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

<sup>30</sup> “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. <sup>31</sup> And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> 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.

## TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To summarize Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain why the logic used by the Pharisees was defective.
- **Daily Application:** To identify an instance of false logic used against Christians today.

## INTRODUCTION

### Unforgiven

The 1992 film *Unforgiven* won four Academy Awards, including the award for Best Picture, in telling the story of an aging farmer who regressed into his previous occupation as a gunslinger. The appeal of the movie for popular audiences is its moral ambiguity. The film takes place in the so-called Wild West, an era depicted as a time when morality was in the eye of the beholder (compare Deuteronomy 12:8; Judges 21:25). During this time, it seemed that a person was only “forgiven” or “unforgiven” on the basis of self-rationalizations.

The Bible, however, is much clearer regarding a person’s forgiveness. Even so, I once counseled a church member who was convinced that he had committed an unforgivable sin. He was in despair, deciding whether or not to live a dissolute life because he did not think forgiveness was an option. The possibility of committing a sin that God will not forgive was troubling, even terrifying.

Understanding what Jesus taught concerning sin that will not be forgiven requires that we pay close attention to the setting and context of today’s lesson.

## LESSON CONTEXT

Although the Gospel of Matthew does not identify its author explicitly, the early church attributed it to Matthew, one of the original 12 apostles chosen by Jesus. His given name was Levi (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27–29), being named after one of the 12 sons of Jacob (see Genesis 29:34; 35:23). Levi was the patriarch of the priestly tribe (Deuteronomy 18:1). The name Matthew is from the Hebrew language and means “gift of the Lord.” Some believe this may have been a nickname given to him, perhaps even by Jesus (compare Matthew 16:18; Mark 3:16–17).

We know little about Matthew’s family background, although he is once identified as a “son of Alphaeus” (Mark 2:14), creating the possibility that he was a brother of “James son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:3), another of the 12 apostles.

Matthew’s chosen profession was to be a tax collector. This means that he worked for the hated foreign overlords, the Romans who occupied Palestine. His job was to squeeze taxes from his fellow Jews to appease the oppressors, and he was allowed to dip into this money flow to enrich himself (compare Luke 19:2, 8). Such tax collectors were seen as traitors. Indeed, the Gospels categorize them with “sinners” and “prostitutes” (Matthew 9:9–10; 21:32).

By contrast, the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were regarded in a positive manner, zealous for scrupulously keeping the laws of the Jews (see Acts 26:5). Even in Galilee, far from Jerusalem, the Pharisees formed an elite brotherhood that demanded strict observance of their understandings of the law. They were identified by their mode of dress (Matthew 23:5). While influential, they were never numerous. Some estimate their numbers to have been fewer than 10,000 at the time of Jesus. They frequently appear in the Gospels as Jesus’ critics and opponents, and He repeatedly pointed out their hypocrisies, teaching that the people needed another way to find God’s favor than the way of the Pharisees (see 5:20; 23:13–32). Similar and parallel accounts to today’s confrontation are Matthew 9:32–34; Mark 3:22–29; and Luke 11:14–23.

### **Kingdom and Healing: Matthew 12:22-24**

The account begins much as the one in Matthew 9:32 does: with a succinct setting of the stage of the controversy that followed. By this time, Jesus had already garnered widespread acclaim as a healer (Matthew 4:23–25; 12:15). The healing ministry of Jesus included casting out demons from people (4:24; 8:16). In the case at hand, the man brought to Jesus suffered physical disability in two ways, in addition to being demonized. To be both blind and mute is an unusual combination, because inability to speak is more often associated with being profoundly deaf. Nevertheless, Jesus healed him, presumably also expelling the demon—with the result that the man could both talk and see, something the Pharisees could not do.

**1. How did the Pharisees try to diminish Jesus’ healing of a demon possessed man who was also blind and mute? (Matthew 12:22-24)**

### **What Do You Think?**

In what ways can people lack spiritual “sight” because of sin?

### **Digging Deeper**

What evidence is there that a person has received spiritual “sight” because of Jesus’ work?

The people who witnessed the miracle were astonished (v. 23), and asked, “could this be the Son of David?” However, some Pharisees present at the healing who had heard the people’s thoughts had a different explanation. They did not doubt the fact of the exorcism, but to explain it they attributed Jesus’ power to an unholy, undivine source. In other words, they ascribed Jesus’ command of the demons to His being in league with the demons themselves. Their logic was that Jesus’ control over the minor demon that afflicted the man was due to the fact that Jesus was in league with a greater demon. The people had great respect for the Pharisees, so this slanderous accusation would be taken seriously. These religious leaders were already plotting to kill Jesus (see v. 14, not in today’s lesson).

### **Kingdom and Unity: Matthew 12:25-30**

Jesus was never deceived about the motives of His opponents. He saw into the hearts of people and knew their thoughts (Luke 6:8; etc.). In the case at hand, Jesus knew of the jealousy of these Pharisees that pushed them to wrongly interpret the healings as evil in origin.

When under personal attack, there are typically three ways for a person to react:

1. Don’t react; say nothing
2. Defend yourself with words of correction
3. Launch a counterattack

Here we see Jesus responding with option 2 as he points out the logical absurdity of the Pharisees’ conclusion.

Many people have heard about Abraham Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech, delivered on June 16, 1858. But it should be remembered that Jesus used the phrasing first in pointing out that any kingdom or city or household that bickers and becomes divided against itself will fall. Turning against one’s allies and fighting them is utter foolishness, for you are aiding and abetting your enemies.

### **2. How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees? (Matthew 12:25)**

Jesus continues under option 2, above, and points out that the Pharisees’ statement was illogical and impractical. Why would Satan fight against himself? Jesus affirmed that Satan had a kingdom, for he is the god of this age (Matt. 4:8-9; John 12:31). If Satan casts out his own demonic helpers, then he is opposing himself and dividing his kingdom.

Satan’s stronghold stands in opposition to the kingdom of Heaven, which was at the center of Jesus’ preaching of good news (Matthew 9:35). Spiritual war exists between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God, not as an internal strife within Satan’s domain. No one thought Satan or the demons were fools in that regard; they would not work against themselves.

Having destroyed the Pharisees’ argument, Jesus now switches to option 3, above as He counterattacks (see verse 27 of today’s lesson). Here Jesus’ response assumes the personhood of Beelzebul, tacitly agreeing with the Pharisees’ claim that Beelzebul was “the prince of demons” (Matthew 12:24, above). Their accusation here was also illogical from their own point of view, though they did not see it.

Jesus points out that there were Jewish exorcists (see Acts 19:13-17, in the account of the seven sons of Sceva). These Jews were itinerant exorcists in the Ephesus region who failed spectacularly to drive out a demon when they used the name of Jesus inappropriately. Jesus said to the Pharisees that these were “your people,” (Matt. 12:27, meaning your disciples) who drive the demons out. Jesus warned that if such local exorcists were summoned, they would serve as condemning judges against the Pharisees. This would defend Jesus’ authority as coming from God, not Satan, further exposing the hypocrisy of the charge.

### **3. What second example did Jesus use to show that the Pharisees’ claim didn’t make any sense? (Matthew 12:26-27)**

Jesus used this occasion to announce a fulfillment of something that He had been preaching. He began His ministry by proclaiming that the people had to repent of their sins because God’s kingdom was near (Matthew 4:17). He taught His disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom of God (6:10). Here He cited his authority over *demons* as a confirmation of the arrival of *the kingdom*. God’s reign on earth had overtaken Satan’s rule (also John 12:31). No demon could withstand the one empowered *by the Spirit of God*! The work of God was evident in Israel, banishing the evil spirits that had crippled and tormented the people (see Luke 7:21; etc.).

### **4. What did Jesus’ casting out demons represent? (Matthew 12:28-30)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

What evidence have you seen of the presence of the kingdom of God in your neighborhood or town?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How can believers remain confident in the ultimate victory of God, even when evil appears prevalent?

Jesus offers one more analogy to show the absurdity of the Pharisees’ charge (v. 29). The analogy involves an “everyone knows” type of illustration. A thief who wishes to steal from a strong man’s house knows that the homeowner must be neutralized before any thievery is possible; otherwise, the thief risks physical harm. One method the robber might use would be to tie up the strong man. If tied up securely, the man could do nothing but watch as his house is burgled.

The lesson of the analogy is that Jesus’ actions in casting out demons is to plunder Satan’s house. It is to mess with Satan’s plans and operations. Since Satan is powerful, how could this be? Only if Jesus were able to neutralize, or tie up, Satan (see Revelation 20:1–3). Jesus entered Satan’s kingdom, overcame his power, and claimed his spoils. His victory was through the Spirit of God (“the finger of God,” Luke 11:20) and not in the power of the evil one. This means that God is Victor over Satan, and that men must decide on whose side they will stand. There can be no compromise. We are either with God or against God.

#### **What Do You Think?**

How do you ensure that you do not live contrary to God and His will?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What spiritual tools (see Ephesians 6:10–18) do you use to fight the influence of evil?

## **Kingdom and the Spirit: Matthew 12:31–32**

Several times the Bible refers to something that has been called the unforgivable sin, or the unpardonable sin (compare Exodus 23:21; Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–27; 1 John 5:16). The verse before us identifies such a sin as *blasphemy against the Spirit*. Therefore, the text takes a very dark turn at this point: Jesus stated that His opponents were flirting with eternal disaster.

Blasphemy is a Greek-based word referring to an insult or slander intended to harm the reputation of a person. Against a human this can be forgiven if admitted with repentance. But consistent and repetitive slander against the reputation of God and His work is another matter. For Jesus, slander against the Holy Spirit is the same as an insult against God.

Remarkably, even speaking against Jesus, the Son of Man, can be forgiven. Church history is replete with stories of powerful opponents of Jesus (such as the apostle Paul) who came to faith and served the cause of Christ. That is not what the Pharisees were doing. They were attributing God's divine work among humanity to Satan! This was not accidental or casual. It was deliberate (compare Numbers 15:30–31).

### **5. Why does God take blasphemy so seriously? (Matthew 12:31-32)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How will you respond to Christians who believe that they have committed an unforgivable sin?

#### **Digging Deeper**

How does a person's willful defiance of God versus their willful concern to follow the ways of God inform your response?

## **CONCLUSION**

What does it take to commit an eternal sin, a sin that cannot be forgiven, ever? Are we in daily danger of this, always walking a tightrope between salvation and eternal damnation? Could a careless word or thought condemn us for eternity? Probably not.

However, in the end, it is for God, not us, to judge whether or when the unforgivable sin has been committed. The old rule of thumb is that if you are concerned about it, you have not yet committed it, for you still have a conscience that discerns good from evil. God and His Word call us constantly to repent. If you still sense the stirring in your heart to get right with the Lord, even if the stirring is weak, you must do so.

Jesus' words remain a lesson for today's church. Opponents of Christianity will always seek to discredit Jesus and divide His followers. Once confronted with the gospel, it is impossible to remain neutral. To reject Jesus is to be against Him. This may be done subtly, however. If we're not careful, we may end up working against Jesus to divide and scatter His followers, bringing disunity to the body of Christ.

## **PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, we want to rely even more on the power of the Holy Spirit for good works and to please You. May we never be intimidated by those who refuse to recognize You and Your power in their midst. We pray in the name of the One who loves us, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

## **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Learn from the Pharisees' mistakes.