

Matthew 12:22-37

Importance

In our day, the lines between the righteous and the wicked are being confounded. Our social institutions now claim that biblical standards are “hateful” and unjust, and that true “righteousness” requires endorsing behavior that God condemns.

In preparing his disciples for ministry, our Lord warned,

Mat 10:25 It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?

As the Pharisees accused our Savior of being in league with the devil, so people will accuse us. If we understand how he answered them, we in turn can answer those who challenge us.

Structural Context

Let’s recall the overall structure of Matthew (chart, Figure 1). It is marked off by the introductions in 4:17 and 16:21, “From that time forth”

We are in the second major section, the Proclamation of our Lord. It begins with a description of our Lord’s ministry of teaching, healing, and preaching, and gives examples of each of these (chart, Figure 2). Each example includes a successively broader invitation, first to the four, then to the twelve, and finally to whoever labors and is heavy laden.

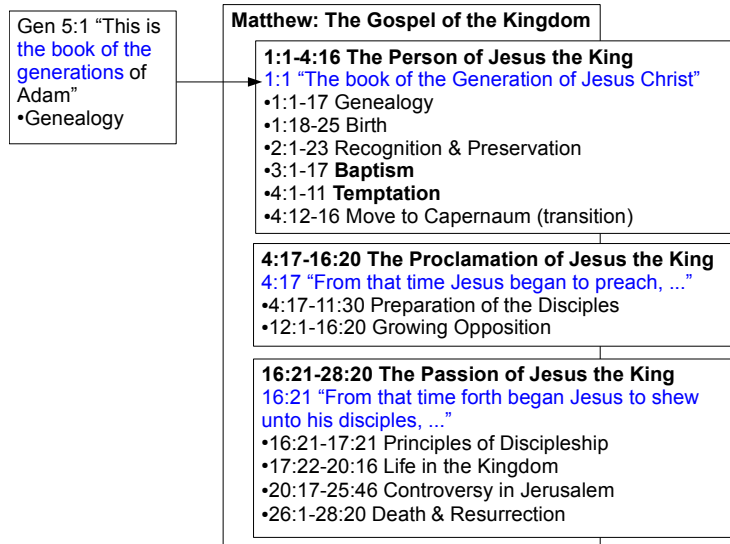


Figure 1: Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Now we see the response to this invitation. Chapters 12 and 13 describe the great rejection in response to the invitation in 11:28-30 (chart, Table 1). First the Pharisees systematically reject the Lord Jesus, then in ch. 13 the Lord begins to teach in parables, for the purpose of blinding those who are not sympathetic to his message. They reject him, and he rejects them. Each of these ends with a brief description of our Lord’s relation to his family, showing that this mutual rejection is not just public (by the Pharisees), but also involves more personal, private connections. The warning of these two chapters is stark. The decision to receive the Lord cannot be deferred. We must respond while we have the chance.

This chapter has five episodes, AABAA (chart, Table 2). In the A episodes, the Pharisees

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challenge the Lord. In the central one (B), the Lord withdraws from them, and Matthew presents Isaiah’s prophecy of the Servant’s ministry to the Gentiles to show that this is part of God’s plan. Thus the chapter marks the shift from Jew to Gentile receptivity.

Today, we focus on the fourth section, in which our Lord casts out a demon, and the Pharisees accuse him of being in league with Satan.

22-37, Is Jesus Satanic?

22-24, The Context

22 Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw.--The KJV “devil” is used to translate two different words (chart). Sometimes it refers to “your adversary the Devil” (1 Pet 5:8), ο διαβολος, “the accuser,” the one called Satan in the OT. Other times (as here) it refers to a demon, δαιμονιον, one of the fallen angels who rebelled with Satan. Our text uses the word in the second sense, and refers to Satan, not as “devil,” but as “Beelzebub” or the “strong

Calling Disciples	4:18-22 the Four	↑ ↓	9:36-10:4 the Twelve	↑	11:2-30 Broader Invitation (v. 28)
Summary	4:23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.		9:35 And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people.		Mat 11:1 And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities.
Detail	ch. 5-7 Content for Teaching		ch. 8-9 Examples of Healing		10:5-42 Exhortations for Preaching

Figure 2: Calling and Preparing Disciples

	Ch. 12	Ch. 13
Public Rejection	1-45, the Pharisees reject the Lord	1-52, the Lord rejects unbelievers (by hiding his teaching in parables)
Private Rejection	46-50, the Lord rejects his family	53-58, his home town rejects the Lord

Table 1: Structure of Matthew 12-13

A: Rejection by Pharisees	B: Turning Toward the Gentiles
1-8 <i>Picking grain on the Sabbath</i> 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.	
9-14 <i>Healing on the Sabbath</i> 14 Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.	
	15-21 <i>Healing great multitudes</i> 18 he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles . 21 And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.
22-37 <i>Casting out a Demon</i> 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.	
38-45 <i>Seeking a Sign</i> 38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.	

Table 2: Structure of Matthew 12

man.”

The miracle has two very different effects on those who observe it (chart, Figure 3).

23 And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?--The interrogative particle *μητι* expects a negative answer: “This can’t be the son of David, can it?” The Lord not the political messiah they expected from passages like Isaiah 60, and yet he satisfies the prophetic signs of Isaiah 35. They are weighing this tension honestly.

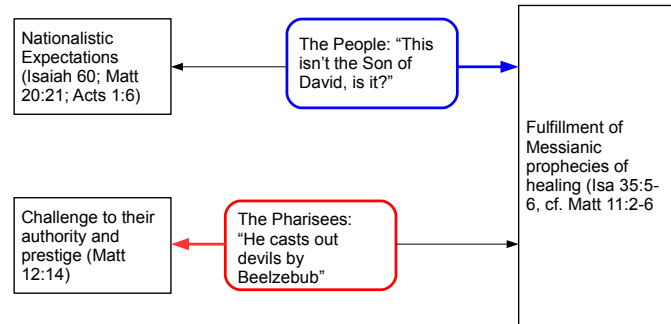


Figure 3: Two different mental conflicts

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.--The people are open to the Lord, but the Pharisees have made up their minds (v. 14) to destroy him. What draws them away from the evidence of the miracles is not a legitimate concern with other unfulfilled prophecies, but his persistent challenge to their own superficial faith: in requiring a righteousness that exceeds theirs (5:20), in risking ritual defilement to reach out to sinners (9:11), in refusing to burden his disciples (12:1-8) and defer mercy (12:9-14) because of man-made laws about the Sabbath.

25-37, The Lord’s Response

The Pharisees are not announcing their skepticism openly, but reinforcing one another in their doubt. But their private discussions are not as private as they think (chart).

25 And Jesus knew their thoughts,--He shows this capability elsewhere:

Matt. 9:2 And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus **seeing their faith** said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. 3 And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This *man* blasphemeth. 4 And Jesus **knowing [seeing] their thoughts** said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?

Matt. 16:7 And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread. 8 *Which* when Jesus **perceived**, he said unto them, O ye of little faith, why reason ye among yourselves, because ye have brought no bread?

This capability is a sign of his deity,

1Sa 16:7 for *the LORD seeth* not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

and said unto them,--He presents two arguments against their conclusion, one from the nature of the miracle itself, the other from the attitude implicit in their speech. In both cases, he organizes his argument chiasmatically (chart, Figure 4).

25b-30, Arguments from the nature of the miracle

First, he shows that the nature of the miracle is inconsistent with the work of Satan. The outside of the chiasm focuses on the instability of a divided kingdom—starting with Satan’s, but ending with his own kingdom. The center section concludes that since Satan will not oppose himself, exorcisms must be attributed to God, authenticating the Lord’s ministry.

25b-30, From the nature of the miracle

31-37, From the nature of their speech

<i>A divided kingdom cannot stand</i>	25b-26, Satan’s kingdom cannot stand divided	30, Christ’s kingdom is not divided
<i>Casting out demons shows God’s power</i>	27 Jewish exorcists	28-29 “the kingdom of God is come unto you”

<i>Its content</i>	31-32, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit	36, idle words
<i>Its source</i>	33, tree and fruit; 34, snakes and their spawn; 35, heart and words	

37, Summary: judged by your speech

Figure 4: Two Chiastic Arguments

25b-26, Inconsistency of a divided kingdom

Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand:--The OT is full of tragedies resulting from division, in houses (Cain vs. Abel, of Jacob vs. Esau, of David and Absalom) and kingdoms (Rehoboam vs. Jehoshaphat, and the resulting decline of what was under Solomon the greatest kingdom in the Near East). This is a general principle, which the Lord next applies to the case at hand.

26 And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?--If Satan is casting out demons, he is fighting himself. Satan might occasionally cast out a demon as a ruse. But the Lord cast out demons routinely and often (chart).

Matt. 4:24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were **possessed with devils**, and those which were lunatick, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.

Matt. 8:16 When the even was come, they brought unto him many that were **possessed with devils**: and he cast out the spirits with *his* word,

Matt. 8:28-29 And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two **possessed with devils**, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way. 29 And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?

Matt. 10:8 Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, **cast out devils**:

Matt. 15:22 And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto

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him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, *thou* Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a **devil**. ... 28 Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great *is* thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

Matt. 17:18 And Jesus rebuked the **devil**; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

The Lord encounters many such cases, brought to him by desperate friends and family members, and he heals every one. The demons fear him when they encounter him (8:28-29), because they know he will oppose them. If this is the work of Satan, he is tearing his own kingdom apart.

27, Jewish exorcists

If Satan is not casting out the demons, it must be the power of God. The Lord first reminds the Pharisees that he is not the only exorcist operating in the land at this time.

27 And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast *them* out?--We know from Acts (chart) that this was a practice among the Jews, though sometimes feigned.

Acts 19:13 Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth.

If casting out demons is the work of Satan, then the Pharisees have condemned their own associates. But surely they would argue that the Jewish exorcists are showing the power of God.

therefore they shall be your judges.--In that case, they will sit in judgment on the Pharisees.

28-29, Positive evidence for the Kingdom of God

And if that argument holds for Jewish exorcists, it must surely hold for the Lord Jesus as well.

28 But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.--

The Lord uses “kingdom of God” rather than Matthew’s more common “kingdom of heaven.” “Kingdom of Heaven” describes the kingdom from the perspective of one who belongs to it (it is the abode of our “heavenly Father”), while the “kingdom of God” emphasizes the distinction between the kingdom and the addressee.¹ The use of this term here is significant in two ways.

First, it is indeed the appropriate term to describe the conquest of the forces of darkness by the power of God. In casting out demons, he is demonstrating the defeat of the usurper, Satan.²

Second, by choosing this term, the Lord emphasizes the Pharisees’ unbelief. Following John’s example, he invites hungry sinners, “Repent, for the kingdom of **heaven** is at hand,” inviting the

1 See the discussion in Robert Foster (2002). Why on Earth Use ‘Kingdom of Heaven’?: Matthew’s Terminology Revisited. *New Testament Studies*, 48, pp 487-499

2 This insight also applies to 6:33, where the command is not to ensure our individual entrance into the kingdom, but rather to promote the spread of God’s rule over all the world, believer and unbeliever alike.

listener to come into the heavenly family. But the Pharisees are confronting, not the kingdom of the *heaven* (as potential members), but the kingdom of *God* (as outsiders).

29 Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.--He describes his conquest over Satan in terms that emphasize that he is fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (chart),

Isa. 49:24 Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? 25 But thus saith the LORD, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children.

30, The Divided House again

Now he returns to the theme of a divided kingdom again. This time, the division contemplated is not in Satan's kingdom. It is in his own kingdom.

30 He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.--So which side do the Pharisees take in this conflict? He turns their accusation back on themselves. They are the one who are really in league with Satan. A divided house will not stand, and if they oppose Jesus, they are not of his house.

It is vitally important that we take this warning seriously. The default condition of human beings with respect to God is not that we are for him, but that we are against him, and he will condemn us as he did the Pharisees unless we repent of our sin and turn to him.

Excursus on Verse 30

This verse invites comparison with a similar, yet distinct verse in Mark, spoken some time before this event (Luke records both sayings: 9:50 = Mark 9:40, and later 11:23 = Matt 12:30) (chart, Table 3).

The circumstances are parallel. In both cases

- Someone casts out a demon
- Someone else disapproves
- The Lord rejects the disapproval.

The difference is that in Matthew the Lord is casting out and his opponents are disapproving, while in Mark someone outside the circle of the disciples is casting out, and the disciples

Mark 9:38-40	Matt 12:22-37
9:38 And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name,	12:22 Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil , blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw.
and he followeth not us: and we forbid him , because he followeth not us.	24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.
39 But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. 40 For he that is not against us is on our part.	30 He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.

Table 3: The Correspondence between Matt 12:30 and Mark 9:40

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disapprove. In both cases, one group of people claims a monopoly over the work of God, and rejects a miracle that does not come from their hands. Satan opposes God, and any action against him advances the kingdom of God. So whoever opposes the casting out of demons, whether the disciples in Mark 9 or the Pharisees at a later time in Matthew 12, is hindering the kingdom, and the Lord rebukes them.

Note the change in grammatical number of the first person pronouns in the two statements (plural in Mark 9, singular in Matthew 12).

- In Mark 9, he is addressing the disciples' attitude toward an outsider, and his instruction teaches how a community of believers should regard those who are doing the Lord's work but are not part of themselves. The assumption should be that they are "for us" unless they give explicit evidence of disobedience to the Lord.
- In Matthew 12, the question is not the relation of the community to an outsider, but rather of people to the Lord himself. Here the default assumption must be that people are lost and at enmity with God, until they receive him.

We have two examples of this charitable attitude later in the NT. The first is from Gamaliel, who counsels the Sanhedrin at the trial of the apostles,

Acts 5:38 And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: 39 But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

God will deal with those with false motives. The second example is Gamaliel's student, Paul. During his Roman imprisonment, many were stepping up to preach Christ, some perhaps hoping to take over the position of prominence that Paul had been given. He writes to the Philippians,

Phil. 1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: 16 The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: 17 But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. 18 What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

This should be our attitude toward those who name the name of Christ and who are not part of our fellowship. Unless they oppose us and what we teach, we are to "forbid them not," but rejoice that we are not alone in seeking the kingdom of God.

31-37, Arguments from the nature of speech

Vv. 31-36 are again chiasmic: they begin and end by condemning the *content* of the speech, but in the center consider its *source*. In this section he elevates his condemnation. Now it applies to any criticism that they bring against him, not just this particular event.

31-32, Its content

31 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.--What is this blasphemy against the HS? In the context, it must be something exemplified by what the Pharisees have done in accusing the Lord of being in league with Satan.

Sometimes the phrase is understood of speaking ill of the HS, as opposed to the Father or the Son. But a) the Pharisees haven't done this, and b) it's not clear why speaking ill of the Spirit should be a more serious sin, and less forgivable, than blaspheming the Father or the Sun.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Spirit is the agent by which God works with the heart of man (chart). The first reference is when God explains the need for the flood:

Gen. 6:3 And the LORD said, **My spirit** shall not always strive³ with man, for that he also *is* flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

Isa 63 and Neh 9 look back to the Spirit's work in the past repeated cycles of God's grace, Israel's disobedience, God's chastisement, and Israel's repentance(see study on Isaiah 63:7-14):

Isa. 63:10 But they rebelled, and **vexed his holy Spirit**: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, *and* he fought against them.

Neh. 9:30 Yet many years didst thou forbear them, and testifiedst against them **by thy spirit** in thy prophets: yet would they not give ear:

Zechariah anticipates that the Spirit will turning Israel back to the Lord in the end times:⁴

Zech. 12:10 And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the **spirit** of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for *his* only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for *his* firstborn.

John gives him this role toward the world in general:

Jn. 16:7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the **Comforter** will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. 8 And when he is come, **he will reprove** the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:

If this ministry of the Spirit is in our Lord's mind, then "blaspheming the HS" (v. 31), "speaking against the Holy Spirit" (v. 32), might refer to hardening one's heart to his convicting work, and persuading others not to heed his urgings. The Pharisees have made up their minds. They completely reject any evidence that goes against their preconceptions, and so they are immune to any work of the Spirit. The reason that such conduct is unforgivable is that it blocks repentance

3 The meaning of the verb translated "strive" is disputed here, but his work in rebuking man's sin certainly seems to be the sense implied in Peter's recollection of this period (1 Pet 3:18).

4 Recall the role of the Spirit under the new covenant, in causing God's people to obey him (Isa 59:21; Ezek 36:27). But the emphasis here is on his work with unbelievers.

and faith, which are the means by which we must receive God's salvation.

32 And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.--We naturally understand v. 24 as attacking *the Son of Man*. But he focuses on what they are trying to do in one another's minds. They seek to stifle the convicting work of the *Spirit* and prevent their associates from receiving the Lord.⁵

Those who have hardened their hearts to the point that they not only reject the convicting voice of the Spirit but seek to dissuade others have no hope.

33-35, Its source

He has condemned their speech. Now he reasons back from the speech to their own character, moving from the *content* of their speech to comment on its *source*.

The argument moves from plants (trees) to animals (vipers), and then to the heart. The sequence is not arbitrary. It recalls the early history of our race.

33 Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.--Compare the Lord's warning against false prophets in the Sermon on the Mount (chart):

Matt. 7:16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? 17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither *can* a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

A tree brings forth fruit appropriate to its character because of the law of creation.

Gen. 1:11 And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, *and* the fruit tree yielding fruit **after his kind**, whose seed *is* in itself,

Having drawn our minds back to the creation, he now moves from Genesis 1 to Genesis 3 with the image of serpents.

34 O generation of vipers,--He learned this characterization from John the Baptist:

Matt. 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Later, he will repeat it in his critique of the scribes and Pharisees:

Matt. 23:33 *Ye* serpents, *ye* generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?⁶

5 They were not always successful. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, believed, and Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin, and may have been a Pharisee. Compare the condemnation here with another warning: Matt 18:6.

6 The only other use of *γεννημα* with reference to serpents is in Luke's citation of the Baptist at Luke 3:7.

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This word γεννημα⁷ for “generation” means “offspring, descendants.” The meaning of this expression is rooted in Genesis 3, where Satan appeared to Eve as a serpent. Made in the image and likeness of God, our parents chose to serve Satan instead. In declaring the consequences, God said to the satanic serpent,

Gen. 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between **thy seed** and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

God predicts that both the Serpent and the woman will have a seed (offspring). We all recognize in the seed of the Woman a promise of the Messiah. But like Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord, the image goes beyond the Messiah to his followers, as Paul makes clear:

Rom 16:20 And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

Here the “seed” who bruises Satan is the body of Christ, the church. So it makes sense to ask whether the seed of the Serpent can also refer to a group of people. In calling the Pharisees the “offspring of vipers,” he characterizes them (and their parents) as descended from the Satanic Serpent. He also speaks directly of people being “the children of the wicked one”:

Mat 13:38 The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the **children of the wicked one**;

Similarly, in John 8, the Lord tells the Pharisees,

Jn 8:44 Ye are of *your father the devil*, and the lusts of your father ye will do.

John’s first epistle gives us a commentary on the events in Genesis. Like Genesis 3, John sees the conflict at two levels. He begins by reminding us that it is possible for people to be related to the devil (chart):

1 Jn. 3:8a He that committeth sin is **of the devil** [related to the devil]; for the devil sinneth from the beginning.

To explain this comment, he takes us back to Gen 3:15. First he describes the two individuals envisioned in the prophecy.

1 John 3:8b For this purpose the **Son of God** was manifested, that he might destroy the works of **the devil**.

Genesis speaks of the “seed of the woman” destroying the serpent, while John speaks of the “Son of God.” The two have more in common than we might think at first. Throughout the OT, it is common to attribute offspring to the father, not the mother. We read of the seed of Aaron (Lev 21:21), David (1 Kings 11:39), Abraham (Ps 105:6), Israel (2 Kings 17:20), Jacob (Isa 45:25), Ephraim (Jer 7:15), or Zadok (Ezek 43:19). Of our Lord alone could it be said that he was “the seed of the woman,” because he had no human father; his father was God.

John, for a more Gentile audience, speaks directly of the “children of the devil” (8:44; 1 John 3:8-12).

7 Not to be confused with γενεα, also translated “generation” in the AV, and referring to a family or period of time

But as in Gen 3:15, John teaches that the “seed” goes beyond the individual to encompass others.

1 John 3:9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. 10 In this the **children of God** are manifest, and the **children of the devil**: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

Note that we are called here, not the children of the woman, but the children of God. Of course, we are the children of Eve (and when John sees a vision based on this prophecy in Revelation 12, he once again describes believers as “her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ,” Rev 12:17). But if our only parents are human, we cannot do righteousness, and we still count as the seed of the serpent, like our parents before us. All unbelievers belong to the “generation of vipers,” a family that began with Eve’s first son:

1 John 3:11 For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. 12 Not as Cain, *who* was **of that wicked one** [related to the wicked one], and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.

But when we are “born of God” (1 John 3:9), so that we are both sons of men and sons of God, we cease to belong to the “generation of vipers,” and we can join our Savior, *the* Son of Man and *the* Son of God, in crushing Satan.

how can ye, being evil, speak good things?--It is impossible for them to speak good, since they are intrinsically, organically wicked. This is the fallen state of all who have not been born again.

for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.--Now he moves to the literal truth implied by the examples of the tree and the serpents, with a proverbial citation from the LXX of Eccl 2:15,

Eccl. 2:15 διότι ἄφρων ἐκ περισσεύματος λαλεῖ “Because the fool speaks of his abundance”

35 A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.--Here he expands the proverb. If the mouth speaks from the abundance of the heart, then one can judge the heart by the speech. The offspring of Satan have hearts that are “deceitful and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9), and show this condition by their speech.

36, Its content

Now he moves back to the content of their speech.

36 But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.--What is an idle word? Again, we have to think of the context. How would the Pharisees respond to the Lord’s disclosure of their secret thoughts? We can imagine them saying, “Oh, we were only joking. Those were only idle words. Don’t take them so

seriously.”

But his last point disqualifies this defense. If speech reveals the attitude of the heart, even our jokes show what we are really thinking. Recall Paul’s warning against jesting (chart):

Eph. 5:4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor **jesting**, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

Aristotle defines this word “jesting” εὐτραπεία as “well-bred insolence,” wittiness, the ability to turn a phrase cleverly, including sarcasm and social insults. It was coveted as a social skill among the Greeks, and in much modern society. But as a hallmark of pride that tears down others even though in jest, it has no place among believers. Solomon already condemns it:

Prov. 26:18 As a mad man who casteth firebrands, arrows, and death, 19 So is the man that deceiveth his neighbour, and saith, Am not I in sport?

In other words: even in jest, the Pharisees’ accusation would be condemned. How much more wicked is it when it is intended seriously.

37, Summary of the argument from speech

37 For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.—

The shift to the singular probably marks this as a proverbial statement, emphasizing the importance of our speech as showing the state of our heart. This sentiment is confirmed throughout Scripture:

David recognizes that right speech is the first step in avoiding wickedness (chart).

Ps. 34:11 Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD. 12 What man *is he that* desireth life, *and* loveth *many* days, that he may see good? 13 Keep thy tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. 14 Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

Solomon passed on this wisdom:

Prov. 13:2 A man shall eat good by the fruit of *his* mouth: but the soul of the transgressors *shall eat* violence. 3 He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: *but* he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.

And in the NT, we are exhorted,

Jas. 3:2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same *is* a perfect man, *and* able also to bridle the whole body.

Throughout the Bible, God is characterized by speech. He creates the world with his words, and man is distinguished from all his other creatures by his ability to speak. One of our Savior’s titles is “the Word of God” (John 1, Rev 19). When we abuse speech, whether by deception or by speaking unkindly, we are betraying the very core of our likeness to God.