

“Binaries”

Matthew 12:22-37

March 18, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The title of this sermon may need some explanation to some. Binary is a word that is primarily applied today to computer languages, in which every bit of data is reduced to two options—either a one or a zero. It is a black and white situation in which there are only two options. In life, there are both black and white situations and other times when there is some gray. Problems occur when we take a situation with some gray and try to make it black and white or vice versa. The state of Alabama is famous for wanting there to be a binary choice, black or white, when it comes to choosing Auburn or Alabama. But the truth is that there are really are other options. Parents often want to make parenting black and white when there are certainly gray areas. We would like a formula to follow that would always lead to mature, well-adjusted and godly children. But the truth is that there are gray areas in parenting. Children have different needs, different personalities that need to shape the way we discipline and nurture them. To try to make parenting black and white does not lead to good results with children.

The opposite is also the case. There are black and white areas of life that become needlessly complicated if we try to introduce gray into them. A past U.S. President was famous for a statement he made once trying to defend his truthfulness when he said of a young white House intern, “There is nothing going on between us.” When evidence was produced that there was in fact something going on between them, he defended himself in what is now a famous statement. “It depends on what the meaning of the word “is” is.” This introduction of gray into a black and white area is especially troublesome in the spiritual arena. If you ask someone, “Are you a believer in Jesus?” and they respond, “That’s complicated,” you can be pretty certain that they are not in fact a believer in Jesus. If you really believe in Jesus, it’s not at all complicated to answer that question.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he says, **“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters”** (v. 30). Neutrality or fence-sitting is not possible with Jesus. That doesn’t mean that a person needs to be rushed into a decision for Christ when investigating who Jesus is. But it does mean that there comes a time when you have to make a decision for or against Christ. To delay that decision needlessly is to make a decision, a very bad decision. But to help us with that decision, Jesus lays out what’s at stake in three black and white situations when it comes to him.

I. The Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Satan

The controversy of this story, just like the one in the previous Sabbath controversies, was launched by a kindness done by Jesus. A demon-oppressed man was brought to Jesus for healing. As a result of the demon, the man was blind and mute. Such a life is a picture of hell. Since he was blind, it was a life of darkness, just like hell. Since he was mute, his would have been a life of isolation, never able to enjoy normal conversation with others. As he had done numerous times already, Jesus cast out the demon and healed the man. This kind of thing had happened so often that popular opinion was beginning to be swayed toward the conclusion that Jesus was in fact Israel's long-awaited Messiah.

The Pharisees are strongly opposed to this conclusion. Since they cannot deny the fact of the miracles Jesus had been doing, they must come up with another explanation for the obvious power of Jesus. So they say, **"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons"** (v. 24). As Jesus points out, their bias results in their putting forth completely illogical arguments. Perhaps if this were the only case of casting out a demon, their argument might make some sense. Satan could conceivably give up a few of his human captives in order to gain far more through a Satan-filled leader who would lead many astray. But Jesus has cast out so many demons that Satan's kingdom is in serious trouble. He is losing ground rapidly. No leader of a kingdom would do what the Pharisees are alleging here, because it is so self-destructive.

One of the lessons we can learn from this is that people who reject Christ, like the Pharisees were doing here, don't do so because of a deficiency in the evidence for Christ. Rather, it is because they don't want Jesus. Like Holocaust deniers, they will make the evidence be whatever they need it to be in order to justify the conclusion they want.

After rejecting the Pharisees' false narrative, Jesus puts forth the true narrative. Satan has a kingdom and God has a kingdom. Kingdoms have structure, a chain of command, a vision of a desirable future and a militancy to see that future realized. The kingdom of Satan is organized and energized by its hatred for God. Since human beings bear the image of God, we are hated and enslaved by Satan in hopes of our ultimate destruction. Satan hates all of humanity because we remind him of the Being he hates and because this Being loves and seeks to redeem his fallen image bearers.

But God also has a kingdom, and he too has a vision for a desirable future. It involves sinners rescued and redeemed from Satan's kingdom that we might live in God's kingdom of peace and joy forever. Jesus likens the kingdom of Satan to a big prison with Satan as its powerful warden. No one can ever escapes that prison because of the power of this warden. But then Jesus

enters, binds the strong warden so that his kingdom can be plundered. The word “plunder” is a strong word. It is what one kingdom does to another when the power of that kingdom has been broken. The soldiers of the victorious kingdom are free to enter the conquered kingdom and remove everything of value.

Jesus provides us with an application to this reality. There is no room for neutrality. Jesus says it like this: **“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters”** (v. 30). To gather with Jesus describes the work of evangelism and missions. There are many ways to be involved in this gathering. This doesn’t mean that we all have to become missionaries to a foreign land. But it does mean that there needs to be a focus in our lives on gathering. Are you praying for any children of Satan’s kingdom to come out of that kingdom? Does your use of money reflect a heart for mission? We have either joined Jesus in the plundering of Satan’s kingdom through evangelism and missions, or we are still prisoners of Satan’s kingdom who are promoting his evil agenda. There is no room for anyone to live between those two options. Jesus says you’re either all in or you’re not in at all.

A second application is to be optimistic about the future of God’s kingdom. It is true that there are troubling signs for the church in America. We are seeing in our culture an increasing antagonism toward the church, as well as a loss of Christian moral consensus. More and more people are viewing Christians like us, those who take the Bible seriously and who hold to historic Christian theology and ethics, as one of the problems to be overcome in our society. But we need not despair. Jesus has bound the strong man and his kingdom is open for plunder.

II. Sins Forgiven or an Unforgiveable Sin

Our second black and white category relates to sin. There are only two types of sin. There is sin that is forgivable and sin that is unforgiveable. One of the common questions I have heard as a pastor concerns the nature of this unforgiveable sin. People read of that and wonder if they have perhaps committed that sin, so they ask me what exactly that sin is. We’re going to talk about that, but let’s not look past the first part of that verse. **“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people”** (v. 31), with the only exception being that one unforgiveable sin. Adultery, murder, slander, blasphemy, kidnapping, bank robbery, drug dealing, sexual abuse and many more are forgivable sins for the one who repents and believes. This is Jesus talking, not Mr. Rogers. He is the one who does the forgiving, and we have it on his authority that these sins are able to be forgiven. Do not let Satan tell you his lies that your sin is worse than that of others, and therefore beyond God’s forgiveness. Do not let him keep you from believing what Jesus says here by just agreeing with it in theory but not receiving it into your own heart. Is there a sin in your life either presently or

from the past that makes you break out in a cold sweat when you think about it? Jesus says this sin is forgivable.

No matter what sin there is in your life, it is forgivable unless it is this one unforgiveable sin. So what is this sin? He calls it “blasphemy against the Spirit” and distinguishes it from blasphemy against the Son. To blaspheme is to speak insulting, slanderous things about God. So what does it mean to insult the Holy Spirit? Let me make a couple of general statements before getting specific. First, common pastoral practice is to tell people that if they are worried about whether or not they have committed this sin, that is a sure indicator that they have not. Those guilty of this sin aren’t troubled by the possibility they might have committed it.

I think we can also conclude that the Pharisees who were speaking against Jesus here had not yet committed this sin, though they were certainly on the road to doing so. I conclude that they had not yet committed this sin based on the simple fact that Jesus is warning them about it. If it is unforgiveable and they have already committed it, what’s the point of warning them about it? It’s too late to do anything about it. So it’s not easy to commit this sin.

We do get an idea of what this sin is in the fact that the behavior and attitude of the Pharisees is what prompts Jesus to give this warning. They are traveling on a road that will take them to this sin if they don’t turn around. What road are they on? They are in the process of rejecting Jesus despite the overwhelming evidence that he is the Son of God. They have seen his miracles. They have heard of lives transformed by his healing and his preaching and teaching. The Holy Spirit has been at work, but they are hardening their hearts against the work of the Holy Spirit and encouraging others to do the same. Here’s my conclusion about this sin. It is the repeated and deliberate rejection of Jesus despite the work of the Holy Spirit to draw us to him, and the resulting attempt to ruin Jesus in the eyes of others. It is not enough for those guilty of this sin to reject Jesus themselves. They must also bring as many as possible with them.

There is a parallel passage to this in Hebrews 6. **“It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance”** (Heb. 6:4-6). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has occurred here because they have tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the Holy Spirit but have deliberately hardened their hearts against that. So one way to make sure you never get on this road is to respond positively to the work of the Holy Spirit. Make sure your heart is quick to confess sin and repent of it, quick to go to Jesus for forgiveness.

III. A Good Heart or a Bad Heart

Jesus puts his finger on the central problem of these Pharisees. It wasn't a lack of evidence or the lack of the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts. The central problem was an evil heart. Like a tree, where the nature of the fruit is directly related to the nature of the tree, the evil hearts of the Pharisees produced the fruit of evil in the form of their words. It would have been a surprise to most of Jesus' listeners to hear him call the Pharisees "evil," because they were generally considered to be the epitome of religious virtue.

It is also hard for us to see our true need. Jesus says that a good indicator of the nature of our hearts can be found in our words, **"for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"** (v. 34). And the best words for diagnosing the condition of our hearts are our "careless" words. Those are the words that come out before we take the time to edit them, the ones we may find ourselves apologizing for by saying, "Oh, I didn't really mean that" or "I was just kidding." A friend of mine tells about a meeting he was in once where there were 2-3 pastors present with about 12 other non-pastors. After a particularly insightful comment by one of the pastors, a successful businessman present remarked, "You're pretty smart for a pastor." As soon as he said it, he realized that he had just insulted all the pastors in the room. His "unedited" word revealed what he really thought of pastors. If you had asked him, "Are pastors dumber than most successful businessmen?" he would have certainly answered in the negative. But his "careless" word revealed more accurately what he really thought.

What do your careless words reveal about the condition of your heart? When you exaggerate the truth in order to make yourself look better, you are revealing that you don't really believe that you look beautiful to God already through Christ. When you tell that little lie because you think that no one will know the difference, you are revealing that in your heart you don't believe there is a personal God who knows and sees all.

Jesus' prescription is clear. Change your heart if you want to change your words. But how can we do that? Can a person change his own heart? No, but God can. This is a call to conversion, by which we get a new heart.

CONCLUSION:

All of these black and white issues really come down to the idea expressed in the song that will be sung in just a few minutes. "In the morning when I rise, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus. And when I am alone, give me Jesus... And when I come to die, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus."

Small Group Questions
Matthew 12:22-37

1. The Bible doesn't teach that every physical illness or handicap is caused by a demon. But it does teach that demons can cause physical maladies. In the case of this demon-oppressed man, the physical handicaps were blindness and muteness. Why do you think the demon chose those two maladies over others?
2. The Pharisees' rejection of Jesus was more heart-based than evidenced-based. They had abundant evidence that Jesus was sent by God, even that he was the Messiah. But in their hearts they didn't want to believe that, so they "found" a reason not to believe. Do people do the same today? That is, do they make a decision about Jesus based more on what their heart wants than on where the evidence for Jesus might take them? Can you think of any examples? If that is the case, does this have any impact on the way we do evangelism?
3. If Satan, the strong man, is bound that we might plunder his household, why is he described in other passages in the New Testament with more active metaphors like "a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour"?
4. Jesus' application of the fact that he has bound the strong man that his kingdom might be plundered is to reject neutrality. "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (v. 30). What is the attraction of neutrality? Do you see any desire for neutrality with Jesus in your own heart?
5. We defined the unforgiveable sin as "the repeated and deliberate rejection of Jesus despite the work of the Holy Spirit to draw us to him, and the resulting attempt to ruin Jesus in the eyes of others." What is the proper application of this sin? In other words, why did Jesus give this warning if only those who don't care about it are likely to be guilty of it?
6. Careless words indicate the condition of the heart, whether it is a good heart or a bad heart. Can you think of examples of careless words that indicate one's heart condition?
7. What should our response be when a careless word escapes our lips that we can't believe we said and that we want to take back?