

## **“If They Slander Jesus...” – Matthew 12:22-37**

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Let's take our Bibles and meet together in Matthew 12...

What a week this has been. Unless you have been under a rock, you have probably heard that the Supreme Court of the United States overruled *Roe v. Wade* (and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*). Many have been praying for this day for almost fifty years, as we've witnessed the staggering statistics—millions upon millions—of babies killed since *Roe* was codified into law, the vast majority of which owing to convenience.

And, of course, abortion is not only destructive to the child, but also to the millions of mothers who have gone through with the procedure and millions of fathers who have encouraged it. I read an article this past week that cited studies that have shown that the rate of suicide increases by 155 percent for those women who have had an abortion. Other studies have shown that somewhere around 80 percent of women polled said that they would not have chosen to have an abortion if they had a better support system or perceived of other alternatives. Studies like these show that abortion is destructive not just to children, but also to those who pursue it. And this matters to us because those created in the image of God matter to us, whether they are inside the womb or have a womb inside of them.

We can—and should celebrate—the overturning of *Roe* because millions of lives will be saved because of it and that is a good thing, despite what some would have us believe. But we recognize that the overturning of *Roe* does not mean the end of abortion in our country. It simply means that the decision is returned to the state level. I think that is a good thing. But that means there is a new pro-life movement afoot. “New movement, same message,” as Chelsea Patterson Sobolik put it. She writes,

“The *Dobbs* decision marks the dawning of a new pro-life movement, and we ought to rightly celebrate it for what it is: the opportunity for thousands of preborn babies to have the most fundamental human right—the right to live. We should pause and praise God for his sovereignty and mercy in this decision.

Then, we should redouble our efforts to care for preborn babies, their families, and vulnerable children, all the while offering the hope of the gospel. May we be on the frontlines of proclaiming that all people are created in the image of God and are inherently worthy of care. And may we display with our lives that *all* people are precious in God's sight.”<sup>1</sup>

I believe that. And because I believe that I also believe that we, as Christians, must continue to do the things we have been doing with renewed vigor. We must faithfully advocate for laws that protect our most vulnerable neighbors. We must faithfully care for the preborn and their mothers and fathers. We faithfully support and supply the hundreds of pregnancy resource centers in our country. We must faithfully continue to lead out in things like adoption and foster care, to ensure that every child has a safe, permanent, and loving home. And we must faithfully preach the good news of the Gospel to women who have had abortions and men who have encouraged them.<sup>2</sup>

But the truth is that even when you pursue good things like caring for mothers and children, there are many in the world that will seek to demonize you. That's what happens. We have to live with that cost this side of Christ's return. But we can take some comfort in knowing that Jesus has identified with us in such treatment. He was so treated in life. Indeed, we will see that in our text this morning, drawn from Matthew 12.

You might remember, earlier in the chapter, Jesus healed a man with a crippled hand. The Pharisees noted that this healing took place on the Sabbath and then proceeded to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath laws. Jesus fielded their accusations, taking them back to the precedents of Scripture and making them look both callous and ignorant in the process. The Pharisees did not take too kindly to such embarrassment, so Matthew tells us, in verse 14, that they “*went out and conspired against him,*” seeking to find a way “*to destroy him.*”

The Pharisees knew that Jesus was a threat to their way of life, but they can’t just go and assassinate Him, like some Zealot or something. They had to be shrewd and subtle. They certainly couldn’t do it now when Jesus seemed to be surging in popularity (even at their expense). They needed to turn the masses against Him. They needed to show that they were on the right side of God’s law and Jesus was only a false prophet and a blasphemer. If they could do this, then perhaps they could rally support to have Jesus killed, like other false teachers were in the Scriptures (e.g., Deut 13:5; cf. Acts 6:9-7:58).

Our text this morning is the outworking of that strategy. The Pharisees are mounting a smear campaign against Jesus. They are whispering in the ears of the people, sowing seeds of doubt about Jesus. They are trying to turn the tide and gain back some ground in the polls. But Jesus sees right through them. In His teaching, He exposes both their foolishness and His own significance. And He draws a line in the sand: “Whoever is not with me is against me...” They don’t know who they are messing with...

Let’s take a look at how things unfold. We will pick up where pastor Evan left off, starting in verse 22. I want to read the whole exchange today, but some of the more controversial parts we will save for a later sermon. Still, I think it’s good to see where Jesus takes His argument, so let’s read the whole thing. Follow along as I read.

*“Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. <sup>23</sup> And all the people were amazed, and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’ <sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.’ <sup>25</sup> Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? <sup>27</sup> And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. <sup>28</sup> But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. <sup>29</sup> Or how can someone enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may 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> Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. <sup>35</sup> The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. <sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.’” (Matthew 12:22-37)*

This is God’s Word...

These verses have troubled a great many people given what they say about an unpardonable sin, “*the blasphemy against the Spirit.*” Yet the context in which that sin is mentioned—the context that we just read—is often less familiar to most people. The discussion comes in the wake of yet another healing. Jesus, we are told in verse 22, heals a demon-possessed man. We are not explicitly told that the torment of this demon is what caused him to be blind and mute, but that does seem to be implied. In any case, this is not a scene where someone comes to

Jesus asking for help. He cannot see or speak. Someone brings him to Jesus. And Jesus heals him, restoring his sight and voice.

Then we are told of two reactions to this miraculous exorcism and healing. First, the people react in amazement. They begin to speculate that Jesus may be the promised Messiah. This is what is meant by their question, “*Can this be the Son of David?*” (12:23). This shows, as one commentator put it, that “Jesus was winning the war of public relations.” Of course He was! He’s been healing people, casting out demons, including outsiders, lightening the yoke of religious expression. Clearly He was “a man of the people and for the people.”<sup>3</sup> Now they wonder, if He was the promised Christ.

The Pharisees are enraged when they sense the hope of the crowd and their suspicions about identity of Jesus, so they offer an alternative explanation that they hope will sour the crowd toward Jesus. They say, “*It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons*” (12:24). If you brought the KJV or NKJV your translation may read “Beelzebub,” which is based on a Hebrew collocation that means “lord of the flies,” but it’s not a good translation here because it’s not what Matthew wrote. Instead, in certain later manuscripts the name Matthew actually wrote (Beelzebul) was wrongly “corrected” to Beelzebub by certain scribes who were, no doubt, trying to link the expression to the name of an ancient Canaanite and Philistine deity mentioned a few times in 2 Kings (1 Kgs 1:2-3, 6, 16; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 19.9). This reading is reflected in the Syriac translation, as well as the Latin Vulgate, which helps explain its popularity to this day. But that doesn’t change the fact that it’s an inaccurate reading, and virtually no modern English version follows it as a result. What Matthew actually wrote was “*Beelzebul*,” a Greek title that seems to derive from the Hebrew words for “Baal” (sometimes translated “lord,” and the name of the Canaanite fertility god that Israel was often guilty of worshiping in the Old Testament) and “Zebul,” which means “exalted dwelling” (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:13).<sup>4</sup> So the name essentially means “lord/baal of the house,” a euphemism for Satan. And, of course, that fits better the context here, where Jesus eventually speaks of His entering and plundering of the “*strong man’s house*” (Matt 12:29).

Now, I want you to notice though, that these Pharisees do not deny the miracle of Jesus, here or elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> They are not like so many modern liberal theologians who deny that Jesus really did any miracles—a claim only possible with historical distance. The power of Jesus is undeniable to those who saw it firsthand. Even His fiercest opponents. His miracles speak for themselves. They’re not going to get far casting doubt on His miracle because there are too many witnesses. Concerning this, Rodney Reeves captures the state of affairs nicely:

“With all of these once-cursed-but-now-blessed people walking around, there was no denying that Jesus had the power to heal everyone who came to him. They were walking advertisements of Jesus’s ministry, which must have encouraged others to seek out Jesus for help—some even bringing their worst cases to him—like a blind and mute, demon-possessed man (12:22). The more Jesus healed, the more they came; the diseased, disabled, and demon-possessed flocked to him like sheep to a shepherd.”<sup>6</sup>

So instead of questioning the miracle, they question the *source* of the miracle. “Sure, Jesus healed the man,” they say. “But that doesn’t mean he was operating on God’s behalf. He’s not. His is a demonic power, derived from the devil himself.” That’s what they mean when they attribute the healing to the power of “*Beelzebul, the prince of the demons*” (12:24). This is a desperate attempt to dampen the enthusiasm of the masses toward Jesus. And this is not the first time that they have suggested that Jesus was in league with “*the prince of demons*” (9:34; 10:25). This is becoming their go-to strategy. Say it enough and people may begin believing it!

But verse 25 says that Jesus knew what they were thinking, which suggests that they were trying to operate in the shadows at this point. They’re not coming at Jesus in the open as before. They’re slandering Him from the margins, with fork-tongued murmurs and gossiping lips. Yet Jesus knows what they are up to and so He speaks to them in the open. The remainder of our text is an account of what Jesus said to these Pharisees. He begins by exposing how foolish their accusation against Him is and then He adds some words that expose what His actions actually signify.

## Jesus Exposes the Pharisees: The Stupidity of Their Accusation

Essentially, Jesus is going to show that their claim that He is acting by the power of Satan is both “illogical” and “inconsistent.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Their Accusation Is Illogical: Would Satan Fight Against Himself? (vv. 25-26)*

In the Pharisaic worldview there are only two sources of supernatural power—God or Satan. They have decided that Jesus cannot be of God because, in their mind, He flouts God’s Law, so He must be acting on Satan’s behalf. Yet once you entertain that possibility you realize it breaks down almost immediately. Why would Satan want to cast out demons? If demons are effecting the torment and destruction that he is seeking, then why would he want to in any way hinder their activity? That wouldn’t make sense. It would run exactly counter to his intentions. So Jesus says, in verses 25 and 26,

*“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.  
26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?”*  
(Matthew 12:25-26)

It’s as if Jesus says, “Pharisees, do you even hear yourselves right now?” Their accusation just doesn’t make logical sense. Why would Satan fight against himself? Why would he attack his own soldiers? Why would he encourage and empower one of his agents to work against another? Wouldn’t such infighting doom his efforts? Wouldn’t such a strategy handicap or dismantle the kingdom he is trying to build? Wouldn’t he want more demonic influence in the world, not less? The answer to these questions is obvious, which shows decisively that the claim of the Pharisees is illogical. “Satan is much too shrewd to liberate people he has enslaved.”<sup>8</sup>

But, second, Jesus also notes that...

### *Their Accusation Is Inconsistent: What About Their Own Alleged Exorcisms? (v. 27)*

Clearly the act of casting out a demon must not be intrinsically evil and of the devil since the Pharisees themselves claimed to have men of their number who did the same thing. Whether or not they actually did is another matter, but the fact remains that they made such claims and that they may not have been false (cf. Matt 7:21-23; Acts 19:13). So Jesus asks, in verse 27, “*If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons [i.e., followers] cast them out?*” This is very clever of Jesus. Why? Because how could they possibly defend themselves at this point? If they say nothing, then they will receive the same cynicism that they were trying to foster toward Jesus. But by the standard that they themselves have applied to Jesus, how could they prove definitively that they act by the power of God and not Beelzebul? They would need to adopt Jesus’ own argument—“*if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself*” (12:26). They either have to remain inconsistent or borrow Jesus’ argument, otherwise, by their own logic, they too must be the devil’s pawns. None of those options are appealing to these Pharisees. So they remain speechless. Check and mate. Jesus caught them in the very trap they set for Him.

But Jesus is not done yet...

Having exposed the argument of the Pharisees for what it was (very dumb), Jesus then goes on to show that His actions do confirm some significant truths about Him. Next time I want to highlight a few of those truths from this text, but I’d like to conclude our sermon in a different way in light of recent events. I began this morning by pointing toward the significance of the SCOTUS ruling that *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* were unconstitutional and, therefore, no longer federally binding. Christians throughout this country (and,

indeed, the world) will celebrate the *Dobbs* ruling for years to come. Since *Roe v. Wade* was first decided in 1973, an estimated 62 million babies have been killed via abortion. That's one hundred times the number that died in the Civil War, America's bloodiest war. That's more than forty-five times the number of American soldiers lost in every American conflict combined, including the Revolutionary War.

So, yes, I think it is right for Christians to celebrate that such a destructive judicial decision of the past—that has grieved the Lord by ending the life of so many created in His image—has been struck down. Yet in celebrating this, a lot of things will be said about Christians that are both illogical and inconsistent. Many will slander us and our actions. This shouldn't surprise us. Indeed, our text this morning reminds us that Jesus told us to expect as much. How so? Because it calls to mind what Jesus said a couple chapters earlier. Look at chapter 10 again. Jesus was talking with His disciples, in anticipation of sending them out, and He tells them to expect mistreatment. Look at verses 24 and 25...

*“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. <sup>25</sup> It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.”* (Matthew 10:24-25)

What does that tell us? It tells us that if the Pharisees can find some reason to malign Jesus as Beelzebul, then don't be surprised when the world maligns followers of Jesus. And what did they malign Him for in chapter 12? For healing a man. For doing something that gave the man an opportunity to have a quality of life. He did a good thing. And they called Him the devil. Concerning this, Daniel Doriani points out that this must be a “sober warning” for us: “If the Pharisees could condemn Jesus for acts of manifest compassion and strength, then one can suffer condemnation for *anything*. Worse, slanderers can think they do God's work.”<sup>9</sup>

Now is our text in Matthew 12 (or even Matthew 10) about abortion and the world slandering pro-life Christians? No. But it does show that sometimes doing the right thing will aggravate others. It is about the cost of following Jesus, and being on His side of history. If they called the master of the house Beelzebul when He came to the aid of a tormented man, how much more will they malign those who have a Christlike posture in this world and toward the people of this world?

They will say that we don't care about women's rights, but in fact we are advocating for the deliverance of hundreds of thousands of little women who have their right to life snuffed out every year in this country.

They will say that we don't care about the hardships that a women must endure if they are to carry a pregnancy to term, but we must show that we do care. We will be there for you, walk with you, help you, provide for you, sustain you, do whatever is in our power to care for you. You're not alone. Despite what you may have heard, we do love you. And we will love that child. There are people in this room who would give sacrificially to make sure you can safely care for your child and there are still others who would take your child in as our own if you decide to go that route. Seriously.

They will say that we don't care for those who have had abortions, who have been traumatized by the choice, or that we think we are better than them. That's not what any of us thinks. All of us—whether we have made that choice or not—have the same need for a Savior. I'm not sure I can say it any better than my friend Cameron Dobbins said it recently.

*“At the end of the day, I too have contributed to the unjust murder of a precious life. My love for my sinful pursuits led to the unjust and brutal slaughter of the Author of life. I gave God every reason to abort His love for me and yet in His infinite grace He humbled Himself to be born of a woman so that He may live a righteous life that would be given to me as if I obeyed God perfectly myself. Not only that, He voluntarily hung on a cross to take my shame and make propitiation for my sins. Nobody could love me more or better than Jesus... When I look inward, I see the worst sinner I know.”*

If you are one of the millions of women who have aborted a child, what you have done is wrong, but we don't think we are better than you. In fact, we are burdened for you to see and savor the sweetness of the Lord's forgiveness and salvation. None of us is more deserving of such grace. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. And we would stand with you there. Undeserving, each and all, but recipients of God's favor through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And when we share the Lord's Supper together, we are, in one sense, confessing that anew. We are saying that though we are not deserving of God's favor, He has so loved us that He gave the life of His Son for us. His life offered for us on the cross is what is pictured in the elements of the Supper—the bread and wine—which I'd invite you to take in hand now...

It would be wrong for any of us to imagine that the sin in our life is no big deal. That couldn't be further from the truth. For it to be forgiven, Jesus had to die. Do you realize that? Think about the last time you committed some sin. It won't be hard. It was recently. Maybe it was a lustful glance or an impatient word. Maybe it was lie you told your spouse or your failure to do something you felt the tug of the Holy Spirit to do. You have one in mind? Does that sin seem like a small thing? I can assure you that it's no laughing matter because even that one sin had the power to separate you from God for all eternity. You could spend the rest of your life embodying perfect righteousness and you would never atone for that one sin. It would always haunt you. It would condemn you. Because God is holy, and He cannot abide sin. We are guilty of cosmic treason. Our wage is death. And that's just the condemnation deserved for one sin, not a lifetime of sin.

But God so loved the world...Even before sin first became a part of the human story, He had planned to save a people for Himself. He told Adam and Eve of a deliverer who would come. We learn as the pages of Scripture unfold that this deliverer was none other than God's very Son, sent to the world to save sinners like us. He lived a life without sin that He might present Himself as the perfect offering on the cross to atone for the sins of those who trust in Him alone to save. His body was broken like bread for our sins. His blood was shed to cleanse us of guilt. His work on the cross is the only means of forgiveness of sins. He died, was buried, and three days later the Father raised Him from the dead, victorious over sin and death. And we can be too, through faith in Christ.

That's the good news. There is not a sin in this world that Jesus cannot and will not forgive, if we would but confess our need for Him and trust in Him alone to save. Have you trusted in Christ? Why not now? You'll never be made right with God through your own efforts. You need a Savior. Jesus is that Savior. Turn from your sin and trust in Jesus. Call upon His name this day and He will deliver you. Listen to the Word of the Lord:

*"...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. <sup>11</sup> For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' <sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. <sup>13</sup> For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Romans 10:9-13)*

Did you hear that? Everyone who calls on His name will be saved. That's a promise. Maybe you are thinking, "But pastor, you don't know the things I've done, you don't know all the guilt I carry around with me..." I don't. But Jesus does. And He didn't wait for you to get your act together before He died for you. "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom 5:8). And what does the Word of God on the screen say? It says there are no distinctions. The Jews generally would have considered themselves pretty moral people. The Greeks definitely were not. They were guilty of every idolatry and sin you can imagine, including the ones that you yourself are guilty of. Yet what does God's Word say, "*There is no distinction between Jew and Greek*" (10:12). As I said earlier, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We all need the saving work of Jesus. And it took no extra work to save you than it did to save anyone else. The same life was offered. The same body broken. The same blood shed.

When we partake of the elements together, we are testifying to our mutual need of Jesus. We are saying by our actions that He is our only hope in life and death. We are reminding ourselves that we share in Christ—partake in Him in the truest sense—through faith alone and are saved by grace alone. So if you desire to be saved, partake what the elements are meant to point to—Jesus Christ—call upon His name to save. He will do it. And for those of you who can say from experience “He will do it” because He has done it for you already, let us remember our freedom in Him. Let us remember the cost He paid to set us free. Let us remember that we have been brought into the family of God, adopted as children of the Almighty. Let us remember that He has done it. It is finished. So I invite you to take, eat, drink, and remember...

Pray with me...

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<sup>1</sup> Chelsea Patterson Sobolik, “Why We Should Celebrate the *Dobbs* Decision,” published June 24, 2022, and accessed online at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/celebrate-dobbs/>.

<sup>2</sup> This list of examples was adopted and adapted from the article cited above.

<sup>3</sup> Rodney Reeves, *Matthew*, SGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 251-252.

<sup>4</sup> G. H. Twelftree, “Demon, Devil, Satan,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 164.

<sup>5</sup> “Chapter 12 tracks with later Jewish polemic against Jesus. Jewish sources do not deny that Jesus performed miracles; instead they accuse him of sorcery or dark magic. The law made sorcery a capital crime (Deut. 13:1-5).” Daniel M. Doriani, “Matthew,” ESVEC (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 194.

<sup>6</sup> Reeves, 252-253.

<sup>7</sup> The language of “illogical” and “inconsistent” was drawn from David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, CCE (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 161-162.

<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1, The King and His Kingdom, Matthew 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 212.

<sup>9</sup> Doriani, “Matthew,” 198.