

# The Kingdom Has Come upon You

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 6:5–15](#)

Background Scripture: [Matthew 12:1–32](#)

## 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.

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**<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.**

## Key Text

*“If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”*

—**Matthew 12:28**

# The Righteous Reign of God

## Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Lessons 6–9

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees.
2. Explain why the logic used by the Pharisees was defective.
3. Identify an instance of false logic used against Christians today.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

- A. Unforgiven
- B. Lesson Context
- I. **Kingdom and Healing (Matthew 12:22–24)**
  - A. Three Maladies Cured (v. 22)
  - B. Two Reactions Provoked (vv. 23–24)

## *Calling Good Evil*

### **II. Kingdom and Unity (Matthew 12:25–30)**

- A. Division's Result Is Failure (v. 25)
- B. Satan's Realm Is Unified (vv. 26–27)
- C. God's Spirit Unites (vv. 28–30)

## *Undivided Kingdom*

### **III. Kingdom and the Spirit (Matthew 12:31–32)**

- A. Blasphemy (v. 31)
- B. Opposition (v. 32)

## **Conclusion**

- A. Evil, Be Thou My Good
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Alphaeus    *Al-fee-us.*

Beelzebul    *Bih-el-zih-bul.*

Levi    *Lee-vye.*

Messiah    *Meh-sigh-uh.*

patriarch    *pay-tree-ark.*

Pharisees    *Fair-ih-seez.*

Sceva    *See-vuh.*

## **Introduction**

### **A. 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.

## B. 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](#).

## I. Kingdom and Healing ([Matthew 12:22–24](#))

### A. Three Maladies Cured (v. 22)

**22. 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.**

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 Greek word translated *healed* here is the source of our word *therapy*. It has the sense of a person being made whole or delivered from afflictions. 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*.

### **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?

## **B. Two Reactions Provoked (vv. 23–24)**

**23. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?”**

To proclaim Jesus to *be the Son of David* was a way to acknowledge Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews (see [Romans 1:3](#)). Some

believed God’s Messiah would have a divine gift of healing ([Matthew 9:27–30](#)). Jesus’ mastery of both the oppressive demon and the physical issues caused *the people* to wonder if he was indeed the Messiah they had been waiting for. Not everyone recognized that possibility though (next verse).

### What Do You Think?

How do the different titles of Jesus, such as “Son of David,” describe the various aspects of his person and work?

### Digging Deeper

What title do you need to understand better, and how will you study it?

**24. But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”**

Some *Pharisees*, not present at the healing, 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 had made this charge before ([Matthew 9:34](#)), and their opposition to Jesus was becoming more entrenched.



Visual for [Lessons 6 & 9](#). As the class discusses [Matthew 12:28](#), ask them for examples of how God's kingdom is different from earthly kingdoms.

Historically, the name *Beelzebul* is related to the name “Baal-Zebub,” the pagan god of the Philistine city of Ekron ([2 Kings 1:2–3, 6, 16](#)). The name means something like “lord of the dwelling,” which relates to the account at hand. The Pharisees did not see Beelzebul as a pagan god, however. Rather, he was thought to be *the prince of demons*, meaning the ruler of all the demons. Their charge against Jesus was that he was the opposite of the Lord's anointed one, the chosen Messiah. Jesus' power, they concluded, came not from God but from the satanic realm.

The Bible depicts demons as crafty and unified in their opposition to

God's work and in their desire to deceive people (example: [Genesis 3:1](#)). Satan was the great deceiver and liar, and still is today (see [Revelation 20:10](#)). To lump the work of Jesus in with theirs surely takes one's breath away!

## Calling Good Evil

In the first half of the twentieth century, Russian Communists did their best to stamp out Christianity in their country. Church buildings were demolished or otherwise “repurposed.” Leaders were harassed, arrested, and killed. Religious holidays were canceled. According to the government, Christians were mentally deficient, immoral, and unpatriotic traitors who cooperated with foreign spies. As a result, many believers met in secret, sometimes under the guise of having a birthday party.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were not the first to call good evil (see [Isaiah 5:20](#)), and they won't be the last. However, no matter how powerful Jesus' opponents were, he was not afraid of them, and we should not be either ([Matthew 10:28](#)). The same Jesus who endured abuse has guided his church through difficult years of persecution, and he continues to do the same today. Whenever opposition comes, is your first thought to remember that he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world ([1 John 4:4](#))? If not, why not?

—A. W.

## II. Kingdom and Unity ([Matthew 12:25–30](#))

### A. Division's Result Is Failure (v. 25)

**25. 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.**

*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.

## **B. Satan's Realm Is Unified (vv. 26–27)**

**26. “If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?**

Jesus continues under option 2, above. Both Jesus and the Pharisees see the demonic realm as an organized *kingdom* (compare Ephesians 2:2; Revelation 2:13). This 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.

**27. “And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.**

Having destroyed the Pharisees' argument, Jesus now switches to option **3** as he counterattacks (see above). Jesus' response assumes the personhood of *Beelzebul*, tacitly agreeing with the Pharisees' claim that Beelzebul was “the prince of demons” ([Matthew 12:24](#), above). There is evidence in the Dead Sea Scrolls that the name Beelzebul was used as a synonym for Satan in Israel at the time, and we should understand it this way here. This is not a hypothetical entity for either Jesus or the Pharisees. Jesus therefore started from common ground to use their charge against him—a charge that he was empowered by Satan and the demonic—to reveal their hypocrisy.

Ancient sources tell us that some Jews were known as exorcists in this period. One example we have is in [Acts 19:13–16](#), 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 even hinted at a personal relationship between the accusing Pharisees and some local exorcists, the *people* 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.

## C. God's Spirit Unites (vv. 28–30)

**28. “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.**

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.).

### 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?

**29. “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.**

Jesus offers one more analogy to show the absurdity of the Pharisees' charge. 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 could do this by “the Spirit of God” ([Matthew 12:28](#), above), who is infinitely stronger than the strongest member of the demonic world, Satan himself. Jesus was not working for Satan. Instead, Jesus has overcome Satan/Beelzebul himself (compare [Luke 10:18](#); [Revelation 12:7–9](#)).

**30. “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.**

Jesus ended his comments with a warning. For a person not to recognize and appreciate his power to heal and cast out demons meant that person was *against* him. Likewise, one who did not *gather with* Jesus was working against him by scattering those Jesus would call to himself. There was no middle ground, no neutral zone. The disinformation campaign of the Pharisees had dire eternal consequences, for no one who was against Jesus would prevail. In the end, all will bow to him in worship ([Philippians 2:10–11](#)).

### **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?

# Undivided Kingdom

Gandhi was rumored to have said, “I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians.” Similarly, an acquaintance from social media recently posted a lengthy rant about the selfishness and intolerance of professing Christians and the corruption of the church. By contrast, he sang the praises of Jesus himself—as a friend of sinners who cared about all parts of the person, physical as well as spiritual. He described Jesus as a fearless radical who spoke hard truths to people in power, called out self-righteous religious people for their hypocrisy, and threw in his lot with the poor and oppressed.

I responded that I *agreed* with his conclusions about Jesus, and that is exactly why I am a Christian. More than anything, the world needs the *real* Jesus, who is all too often hard to see through the smoke and mirrors that some believers throw in the way. God is not divided against himself, nor is his kingdom. Do you live in a way that helps his kingdom grow, so that unbelievers see your actions and attitudes and want what you have?

—A. W.

## III. Kingdom and the Spirit

([Matthew 12:31–32](#))

### A. Blasphemy (v. 31)

**31.** “And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

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.

## B. Opposition (v. 32)

**32.** “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.”

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](#)).

We should understand this verse as a warning rather than a pronouncement of judgment. None of the Gospel accounts of this incident indicate that the Pharisees had committed full blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and therefore had entered into a state of eternal unforgiveness. But they were surely close. That Jesus would issue this grim warning revealed his underlying love and concern for them. He did not want them to cross the line and be committed followers and servants of Satan.



## 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

## A. Evil, Be Thou My Good

In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, author John Milton has Satan musing at length on his situation and prospects. Satan realizes that his rebellion against God has left him without hope for redemption; thus he utters, “Farewell, hope.” Satan then reasons, “All good to me is lost.” He had begun a journey away from God from which there was no return. Therefore, he decided, “Evil, be thou my good”—one of the most chilling lines in all of literature.

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?

We should recognize that some Christians fear the possibility of committing an unpardonable sin. However, we are probably not in a position to evaluate for sure whether it has been committed. Paul speaks of those who have a “seared” conscience ([1 Timothy 4:2](#)), referring to those who will not and so cannot repent. They have willingly reversed the order of good and evil in the universe, becoming like those Isaiah

condemns when he says, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness” ([Isaiah 5:20](#)). These are the ones who have agreed with Milton’s Satan: “Evil, be thou my good.” Some would say today that evil and depravity are celebrated more than good. But we must not turn our backs on the unrepentant people in our community, just as Jesus did not abandon the Pharisees without a warning.

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.

## **B. 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.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

Learn from the Pharisees' mistakes.

## Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### Into the Lesson

Write the following statement on the board:

*What are the worst crimes?*

Ask learners to brainstorm responses to the question and write their responses on the board. After responses are provided, work together as a whole class to rank the crimes from the perceived worst to perceived least bad.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of “Seven Deadly Sins?” activity from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. Allow volunteers to share with the class how they answered.

Make a transition to the lesson by saying, “Today we are going to study a passage of Scripture that can be difficult to understand. In it we will look at a certain deadly stance toward God and his work.”

### Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Matthew 12:22–30](#). Divide the class into

four groups and distribute a handout (you prepare) with the questions below. Each group should answer the question from the perspective of their group's namesake.

**Healed Man Group:** 1—What was it like to be possessed by a demon? 2—How did it affect your life? 3—In what ways did your life change after Jesus cast out the demon?

**All the People Group:** 1—What was your reaction when you saw Jesus heal the demon-possessed man? 2—In light of this healing, what did you think was Jesus' true identity?

**Pharisees Group:** 1—What upset you about Jesus' act of healing? 2—What accusation did you make against Jesus?

**Jesus Group:** 1—How did you answer the Pharisees? 2—What was especially illogical about their claims?

After five minutes, ask a volunteer from each group to present their group's responses.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Matthew 12:31–32](#). Then distribute an index card to each learner. Say, "Most people would admit that they don't have a very clear understanding of the meaning of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I've used information from the lesson commentary to write some true-false statements about this subject."

Say the following statements and have each learner write down true or false for each statement. (Note: The correct answers are in italics.) After each question, review the answers with the class.

1. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be forgiven. *False; "Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven."* (v. 31)
2. Jesus warned the Pharisees that by accusing him of working with Satan, they were in danger of this blasphemy. *True.*
3. Slandering the reputation of another person is bad, but slandering

or blaspheming God's reputation is more serious. *True.*

4. Speaking against Jesus is an unforgivable offense. *False; "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven." (v. 32)*

5. This sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit occurs when someone knowingly attributes the work of God's Spirit to Satan. *True.*

## Into Life

Divide learners into pairs and have them use the internet on their smartphones to research examples of a faulty logic that is used against the Christian faith. After 10 minutes, ask volunteers for their findings and write the examples on the board. Have learners share ideas of how they would respond to each example. Close with a prayer, asking God for courage in the upcoming week to share the good news of Jesus in challenging situations.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the "Arguments Against" activity from the activity page. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.