

INTRODUCTION

Whether we admit it or not we evaluate things with certain presupposition in mind. We make judgment using our own preference and even our own standard of good and bad. However, our own assessment may not necessarily be 100 % accurate all the time. You don't think so? Let us try a little test someone sent me. I need to apologize to the Chinese readers among us because this test is written in English. What can you see from the message on the screen? I was told that if you can decode the message correctly then you are still relatively young. I can send this test to you via email if you still don't get it. Isn't it amazing how our brain can fool us into believing what we see as something other than the real object? Because of the presupposition in our mind, we choose to believe what we want to believe. That is the same problem with the Pharisees in Jesus' time. They completely rejected Jesus as the Son of God. The Pharisees were the respected religious leaders then. Since Jesus arrived they felt being threatened by Jesus' popularity. In Matthew chapter 12 alone there are five recorded conflicts, and four of them involved the Pharisees. In our story today Jesus healed a patient who was both blind and mute because of demon possession. After Jesus cast out the demon the man was able to see and talk. The crowd at the scene was amazed by the miracle. They wondered if Jesus was the Messiah, namely the Savior prophesied in the Old Testament, because Jesus displayed power from God. On the contrary, the Pharisees slandered against Jesus that He was tapping into the power of the devil to cast out the demon. In Jesus' reply He condemned the Pharisees for their spiritual blindness. Even today, people still wonder the true identity of Jesus. In this story Jesus proved Himself to be the Ruler of God's Kingdom.

EXPLANATION

1. 否定 Denial

The first thing we can see from this passage is the Pharisees' denial of the true identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Let us look at **verse 24**: But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." We can equate Beelzebub as another name for Satan. This is not the first time the Pharisees attributed Jesus' miraculous power to Satan. In Matthew chapter 9 Jesus cast out a demon that made a person unable to speak. In **9:34** the Pharisees came to the same conclusion about the source of Jesus' power: But the Pharisees said, "It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons." It is one thing to comment that: "I don't know where Jesus gets His power." But it is outrageous to say that Jesus derived His power from the devil. Prophet Isaiah has a comment for the Pharisees in **Isaiah 5:20** - Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. How could the Pharisees say such an evil thing? The root cause was their complete denial of Jesus in their hearts. Jesus said in **verse 30**: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." What Jesus meant is that there is no neutrality in spiritual matter. A person either accepts or denies Jesus as his Savior and Lord. The seeker friends among us may find that comment offensive. I appreciate that you have a heart to seek after the truth. Therefore, I have no intention to condemn

you. However, Jesus told us that we are either on His side, or we are not. There is no middle ground. For the Pharisees, it is clear that they stood in an antagonistic position against Jesus. Jesus described their heart condition in **verses 33 to 35**: 33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.” A tree can only bear fruits of its kind – apples from an apple tree, and so forth. The ability to bear apples arises from the “appleness” of the tree. Jesus used that analogy to explain that the evil remark from the Pharisees’ mouths reflected their gloomy heart condition. When Jesus contrasted good versus bad (or good versus evil) He was not talking about one’s moral status, but his spiritual status. Our words is a powerful tool. By words they also include phone call, email, and any other communication means. We can use words to encourage people, but we can also use words to tear people down. For Christians our words should mirror our relationship with the Lord. **James 3:9-10** remind us: 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Don’t we all misuse our tongue like that all the time? Paul also encourages us in **Ephesians 4:29** that: Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. The Chinese translation for “unwholesome talk” may make us think that Paul was talking about cussing. In the Greek text, the phrase actually means worthless speech. The key is that we should use words to edify one another. However, even as Christians we are often judgmental toward others in our hearts like the Pharisees. We are critical of others’ intent. We think that if good things are not done according to our ways, then it is still bad. We judge people by the standard we create. However, we find excuse not to abide by the supreme standard of God’s Word. We may have certain knowledge of the Bible but we do not live by it. How can we get rid of the Pharisees’ attitude in us? The antidote is simply to embrace God’s truth. Whatever God says, that is the final answer. Whether we like it or not, and whether we win or lose we submit ourselves to the truth. We should love God more than our face.

2. 辯護 Defense

In response to the Pharisees’ denial, Jesus came to His own defense by asking the Pharisees three questions. Question number one is in **verses 25 and 26**: 25 ...“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. 26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?” We Chinese aptly describe the situation as “devil beating up devil.” If there is a civil war in any kingdom the result would be a complete implosion. Jesus moved on to His second question in **verse 27**: “And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.” Chinese call this tactic “thrusting your spear at your own shield.” If Jesus relied on the power of the devil for exorcism then based on whose power did the Pharisees’ disciples carry out the same task? Immediately, it was a slap on the Pharisees’ face. Let us skip down to **verse 29** for the third question from Jesus: “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 rob his house.” If you want to conquer a strong man then you have to be more powerful than him. By chasing out the demon, Jesus proved that He had a power greater than the force of darkness. Therefore,

Jesus concluded in **verse 28**: “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” When people witnessed Jesus’ miraculous power to heal the sick and drive out demons they knew that the Kingdom of God had arrived. In **Luke 7**, John the Baptist was wondering if Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus replied John’s messengers in **7:22** that: So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” All those miracles, along with casting out of demons, proved that the Kingdom of God had triumphed over the kingdom of darkness. Jesus the Kingdom Ruler came to set people free from the bondage of Satan. Paul also describes the mighty power of God’s Kingdom in **Ephesians 1:19-21** that: 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, 20 which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. God’s power is above any authority. God the Father infuses in us the same power that raised Christ from the dead. No, I do not mean that we can perform miracles like Jesus did. However, God gives us His power to serve Him and His people. If even Jesus was accused we should not be surprised to face criticism. Sometimes in ministry we can be misunderstood. Some comments are friendly reminders to which we should humbly listen. However, how should we deal with the caustic remarks that are intended to hurt us? We should imitate Christ’s example. We should try to clarify any misunderstanding. However, we should not be too anxious to defend ourselves. Instead, we let the results speak for us. When God blesses others through our work then people can clearly see that God’s power is manifested in us. Once a brother shared that he felt the Holy Spirit working in him in his sermon preparation. To that comment I responded: “I can sense that every week!” If I truly believe that I cannot do it on my own effort but I can still accomplish the task, then the power is obviously from God, not from myself. Other examples I can think of are like a timid person having the boldness to share the gospel to people more senior than his age; or a young Christian who does not have a wealth of Biblical knowledge exercising spiritual discernment to analyze a problem. God will come to our defense if we are representing His Kingdom.

3. 結局 Destiny

The Pharisees showed their denial of Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus came to His own defense about His true identity as the Ruler of God’s Kingdom. Finally, Jesus revealed the destiny of the Pharisees because of their sin. Jesus said in **verses 31-32**: 31 “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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.” The Pharisees not only sinned against the person of Christ. They also sinned against the Holy Spirit by attributing God’s power to Satan. When **Mark** recorded the same incident he wrote in **3:29-30** of his gospel: 29 “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.” He said this because they were saying, “He has an evil spirit.” It is an utmost blasphemy for the Pharisees to accuse that the Spirit in Jesus was from the devil. God would not forgive such sin of blasphemy, and the Pharisees in their hardened hearts would not ask God for forgiveness anyway. Jesus continued to reveal the destiny of the Pharisees in **verses 36-37**: 36 “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every

careless word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” The word “careless” in the Greek text means something that is worthless. The Pharisees spoke those careless words to viciously damage Jesus’ character. They would be eternally condemned. That is an irreversible judgment against the Pharisees. After hearing Jesus’s verdict we cannot help but ask: “Is it possible for us to commit the same sin? Can we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit like that?” Let us be clear that Jesus dealt with a situation where there was a willful denial of the work of the Holy Spirit when there was no other possible explanation for Jesus’ power. Therefore, we are not talking about a general situation of ignorance or disbelief, which most of us were in when we were still gospel seekers. A good example for that in the Bible is Paul. He was a Pharisee and he zealously persecuted Christians. But God gave Paul special grace, saved him and sent him as an apostle to the Gentiles. Listen to Paul’s testimony in **1 Timothy 1:13-14** that: 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. After Paul became a Christian, he looked back and realized that he was opposing Christ Himself. Another example I can think of is the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus on the cross. Remember how Jesus pleaded to the Father on their behalf while He was still hanging on the cross? **Luke 23:34** records: Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”... Were the soldiers not guilty by crucifying a sinless man? Of course not! However, they were completely ignorant about the significance of the execution – they killed the Son of God, and in doing so accomplished God’s salvation plan. Back to my original question. After Jesus ascended into heaven no one can possibly blaspheme against the Holy Spirit like the Pharisees did. It is because we can no longer witness Jesus administering God’s power in front of our eyes. However, even today we have a choice to accept or reject Christ. Jesus has never stopped revealing Himself to us that He exists and He is the only true God. In the universe and in nature God displays His power, wisdom and order. Through the complexity of life He proves that He is our Creator. From the progress of human history to our personal experience He tells us that He is sovereign and He has a perfect plan for everything. Dear friends: sooner or later you have to make a decision based on the evidences God shows you whether or not He is the only true God. God loves you and He is inviting you to build an eternal relationship with Him. Just like the Pharisees, the decision you make has contrasting eternal destinies - whether you will forever be with God, or away from God.

CONCLUSION

What do you choose to believe? Based on what factors do you come to your judgment? Jesus the Ruler of God’s Kingdom had arrived some 2,000 years ago. He gave us God’s Word in the Bible. Dear friends: you can come to know Him by reading His Word. For our brothers and sisters: since Jesus is the God of truth He requires us to walk in the truth also. Whatever we say or do we have to reflect His truthfulness. One day every thought we have, every word we say and every deed we do will be laid bare before our Lord. We have to give an account of our lives to Him. In closing let me share an interesting but inconceivable story with you. Tabloids about celebrities have been around for a long time. Nowadays there are also political tabloids. Those are fake news aiming to confuse people. In September 2016 at the height of the presidential election Cameron Harris wrote a fabricated story that Hillary Clinton were planning a forgery. Harris spent \$ 5 to buy a website and posted a news article that someone in Ohio found a few

boxes of ballots pre-marked for Clinton in a warehouse. Afterward, Harris stated his intent was purely for money. Within a few days he earned over \$ 5,000 from the advertisements posted on the website. Finally, the news was proved to be fraudulent and all the advertisements were removed. It seems hard to believe that people would accept a story like that to be true. Harris excused himself for saying that politics by nature is full of half-truth and exaggeration. President Obama said it right at his farewell speech: “Increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it’s true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.” Our belief is not based on popular opinion. Christianity has its foundation in truth. Every word in the Bible is true. Jesus is the God of truth and in Him there is no falsehood.