

## THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL ACCUSATION (Matthew 12:22-37; Mark 3:20-30)

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### INTRODUCTION

Remember this guy? Pinocchio — the story of a marionette magically brought to life. While still a puppet, he is promised by the blue fairy who brings him to life that she will turn him into a real boy — if he proves himself to be brave, truthful, and unselfish. He also learns, much to his surprise that, if he tells a lie, obviously the opposite of truthful, the strangest thing happens: His nose grows! The story of “Pinocchio,” originally an Italian children’s novel written in 1883, was made into a world-famous movie by Walt Disney in 1940 and is considered one of the greatest animated films of all time. And, in fact, it has carried on into our modern culture: The Washington Post has employed “fact-checkers” who analyze the statements of politicians; the truthfulness of these statements is given any of a number of “pinocchios” — the cartoon face with the growing nose. No “pinocchios?” You’re telling the truth. One “Pinocchio?” You’re fudging things a little bit. You get four “pinocchios?” You’re lying like a rug! Obviously just the opinion of one newspaper.

But lies themselves? We hear them all the time, in a variety of circumstances. We teach our kids that lying is wrong. God certainly addressed lying; the ninth commandment He gave to Moses said as much: ***“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” — God speaking, Exodus 20:16.*** Seems pretty cut and dried, right?

Yet history is filled with examples of lies, outrageous statements that, though not true, had incredible consequences that were all too real. For example, here are some direct quotes that were incredibly and painfully far from the truth:

- 1) “In today’s regulatory environment, it’s virtually impossible to violate rules” — Bernie Madoff (2007). Even at the moment he spoke this, Madoff was overseeing a Ponzi scheme that wound up bilking some 4,800 investors to the tune of some \$64.8 billion dollars. Admitting the next year in court that his asset management firm was “one big lie,” he was sentenced to 150 years in prison. Incidentally, he died this past Tuesday at the age of 82.
- 2) “There is no famine or actual starvation, nor is there likely to be” — Walter Duranty, New York Times (1933). Duranty was a reporter assigned to cover Stalinist Russia in the 1930s. At the time, Stalin was determined to end private farming by forcing farmers into government-controlled communes. This policy was brutally enforced in the Ukraine, causing widespread starvation in that region. But such reporting by such an elite, prestigious paper as The NY Times persuaded western governments that there was no need to push for famine relief. It is estimated that between two and four million Ukrainians died as a result of Stalin’s brutal tactics. Incidentally, in 1990, the Times reversed course, calling his articles denying the famine as “some of the worst reporting to appear in this newspaper.”
- 3) “The German Army was stabbed in the back” — Paul von Hindenburg (1919). One of the greatest lies of history was spoken by one of the leading German generals of the First World War, Paul von Hindenburg, deflecting any criticism of himself or the German military in general by claiming that it was radicals and other undesirables back home, including Jews, that had caused German’s battlefield defeat. Its constant

repetition eventually led people to both believe the lie and then begin to think that they deserved the greatness that had been stolen from them. This lie eventually led to the formation of the Nazi party and fueled the rise of Adolf Hitler, culminating in a Second World War that is estimated to have killed 30-40 million in Europe alone.

Today we are going to be looking at another lie that was intended to discredit somebody — specifically Jesus of Nazareth. Our main text will be from the gospel of Matthew, with both Mark and Luke adding some color to the story. So, as we take on this episode in Christ's ministry, **let's start with a moment of prayer.**

**TEXT & ANALYSIS (Luke 8:1-3; Mark 3:20-21; Matthew 12:22-37)**

*After this (the dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house), Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve (disciples) were with Him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means — Luke 8:1-3.*

Now while it would not have been unusual for a rabbi to receive monetary support from wealthy women, it certainly would have been unusual, even radical, for supporting women to also travel with that rabbi. Now while Mary Magdalene is better known, Joanna was the wife of a man who worked in the administration of Herod Antipas (the same Herod who had John the Baptist killed and briefly interacted with Jesus during his trial); as for Susanna, nothing is actually known. We can, however, assume that these women were named because the early church would have known who they were, so mentioning them would have added to their legacies and examples. And just from a practical standpoint, the disciples had “left all” to follow Jesus, and Christ himself never returned to the craftsman profession he had learned from his father Joseph — unlike Paul who we know worked at his trade as a “tent maker” to support himself during his ministry. So, this support was a very necessary and cherished blessing.

*Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples were not even able to eat — Mark 3:20.*

Talk about packing the house; Jesus and His disciples couldn't even maneuver themselves enough to eat some bread. But over the next little bit, we were going to get two very different views on Jesus — starting with some additions to the crowd that day: His family.

*When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, “He is out of his mind” — Mark 3:21.*

Now the Greek tells us that this “family” was those “close to Him.” Whether just immediate family or cousins added in or family friends or whatever, these were people who were extremely concerned about Him — to the point of wanting to literally take custody of Him, to enforce their power over Him.

Now this is the second time that we have seen Jesus doubted as to who He really is by people who you would think would have been most out front in spreading the truth about Him. The first was John the Baptist (“Should we be looking for someone else?”) and now this incident. They both have something in common: While John, and certainly Mary and Joseph, had divinely heard the meaning of the life of this Messiah that was on His way, they didn't have a

clue as to what that life might actually look like, meaning how the life of a Messiah would actually flesh out. All they do know is that they are hearing some really wacky stuff. Miracles — really? And letting Himself be called all kinds of messianic things, are you kidding me? It seemed that Jesus had taken leave of His senses. And we also know from John 7 that His brothers did not believe in who He was at all. Add to that any concerns for His being a public embarrassment to the family, and you can maybe see why they thought this attempt to get hold of Him was a good idea. To this day, one of the worst things you can do in Middle Eastern culture is to shame your family — and Jesus seems to be “pedal to the metal” accomplishing that if nothing else. So, some members of the family conclude: “Hey guys, we gotta do something about this!” But Jesus wasn’t going anywhere. In fact, to do so would have simply validated that opinion: “This guy is nuts!”

But then, in the midst of all this chaos, something extraordinary happens: ***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 — Matthew 12:22.*** And two very different sides erupted:

Side 1: ***All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” — Matthew 12:23.*** It appeared to some people that things surrounding this Jesus of Nazareth were beginning to add up. Even though the question is constructed in a way that anticipates a negative response, the question still makes its way out there: “Could this be the One, the Messiah, that we have been waiting for for all these years?” But they are quickly countered by Side 2:

***But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul (another Hebrew name for Satan meaning “lord of the high abode” or “prince Baal”), the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons” — Matthew 12:24.***

The Pharisees had been fighting a losing battle with this guy almost from the first day of His showing up. In somewhat a sense of desperation, they brought out the one charge that could ruin Him and be very difficult if not impossible to disprove — or so they thought. But Jesus had other ideas.

***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. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? — Matthew 12:25-26.***

“OK, guys; what you’re saying doesn’t even make sense. Any kingdom, any city, any household divided against itself, fighting against itself, cannot survive. You know that; I mean, that’s obvious, right? So if I’m working for Satan like you say, then by what I am doing, Satan is fighting against himself. How can he survive that?”

And then His next great point: ***And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:27-28.***

The ability to drive out demons had not originated with Jesus. There were other Jewish exorcists, including within the ranks of the Pharisees, who had apparently also been granted that power by God’s grace. So, were they willing to credit all the exorcisms they had been

doing to the power of Satan as well? But if Jesus was operating by the power of the Spirit of God, then God's kingdom has come and, in fact, is here, right in front of you.

***“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 Christ, Matthew 12:29.***

Jesus then gives them a sample of his own logic in all this. A man demon-possessed has been set free, in front of all of them. The reason that has been able to happen, in fact, the only reason that has been able to happen, is because Jesus has “tied up the strong man” — Satan! Jesus has by overpowering Satan effectively bound him, allowing Him to “plunder his house” by taking this man away from him. Now the first time that Jesus showed his power over Satan was in the wilderness, which was a battle between the two of them with no earthly witnesses. But this moment had played out in front of a whole crowd of witnesses, now able to verify what Jesus has said: He has tied up the strong man. Satan had been powerless to stop Jesus from “plundering” his house. And then Jesus makes one of his most basic claims, along with one of His most clear conclusions:

***“Whoever is not with Me is against Me, and whoever does not gather with Me scatters” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:30.***

Christ is very matter of fact, but the point He is making has far-reaching consequences. How far reaching? How about right on through eternity? Christ means a choice has to be made: Either you believe that He is, completely, everything He said He is, and respond to that fact, or you believe nothing about Him. It's not a negotiable, nor can you accept some parts and not others. When it comes to Jesus Christ, it is all or nothing.

And then Jesus goes on to explain what has come to be known as the “unforgivable sin,” that blasphemy against the Spirit will not now, not ever, be forgiven: ***“And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:31-32.***

So, what does Jesus mean? Now books have been written, sermons preached, and seminary classes taught on this one topic. Now I've written no books nor taught any seminary classes, but I will try to make it as simple as possible in this sermon.

It appears that this originally was a sin that could have only been committed while Jesus was here on earth. And since Jesus physically appeared to be no different than any other man, speaking against Christ while He was on earth — which many people did — was forgivable; Paul would have been an example of somebody who did this. But when Jesus returned to His Father in heaven, the Spirit of God came to earth specifically to confirm that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah, and that He also was alive, as evidenced by the works His followers were now doing in His name. So to blaspheme the Holy Spirit was to reject the witness of the Spirit regarding Jesus Christ. The only outcome of that choice was eternal judgment.

So what about today? Two things to keep in mind: (1) If you are concerned that you have committed this sin, you haven't. Someone who sincerely rejects the Holy Spirit couldn't care less. And (2) the ultimate unpardonable sin today is a life's final and complete rejection of Jesus Christ. God will never forgive that choice. As proof, everyone who winds up spending

eternity in hell will be there as a result of having rejected the testimony of the Spirit regarding the presence of sin in their lives as well as the affirmation that Jesus Christ is God's one and only way, truth and life to forgiveness through Him by means of Christ's death on the cross.

And then Jesus continues: ***“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. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:33-37.***

Jesus is describing the impossibility of anything good to come out of anything bad, as illustrated by one particular phrase He uses: “brood of vipers,” referring to the Pharisees who had brought their “radical accusation” against Christ. “Brood” refers to the young brought into the world by a parent. The parent in this case would be the chief “viper,” that is, Satan, a reference to Satan's being considered the serpent in the Garden of Eden, and the Pharisees being reflections of Satan being their parent.

And then Jesus closes with a picture of how complete and wide-ranging will be judgment. Even the “empty” words, that is, words that were completely careless yet did damage to somebody, will be judged.

## **APPLICATION**

So there is a lot to digest in these words that come out of another of Christ's amazing, gracious miracles. But we started out talking about lies, so we are going to bring that back as we apply some of what we have learned.

First, lies are what Satan does best; it's his greatest strength. As Jesus reminds us: ***“[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” — Jesus Christ, John 8:44b.*** So with what lies does Satan attack us? Well, for one, Satan attacks us with the lie that all our sins are NOT forgiven by Christ's death on the cross. It's how he keeps us focused on our past — the sins we committed that are still haunting us. Therefore we have not been forgiven our sins; we are still sinners. You see, Satan loves nothing better than to keep our past in our present. But Jesus DID completely die for every one of our sins; in other words, there are no sins left behind. Paul said as much: ***[T]here is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit — Paul, Romans 8:1-4.***

Second, Satan's lies are always negative. He doesn't want to build us up; he wants to knock us down; in fact, more than that: He wants to devour us, literally to eat us alive. He'll throw out the lies that we're not good enough, not smart enough, that nobody wants to hear our stories. Paul told us that we ***can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us — Paul, Philipians 4:13,*** so Satan will try to keep those words out of our heads. He'll keep trying to

derail us with a message of hurt and frustration. Most of all, he will do everything he can to keep our focus on ourselves and away from Christ. As long as we are detoured from Christ, we are in trouble; we always will be. One of the great results of coming to Christ is that we are invited to abide in Christ, staying focused on what He so graciously did for us. If we are focused on the work of Jesus, the work of Satan is going to have one incredibly hard time showing up on our radar. That's why it is so important to be absorbing Scripture every chance we get — sermons, Bible studies, devotions, everything. God's word is truth; in fact, David called it flawless. His truth will always cut the legs out of whatever contrary arguments Satan wants to throw at us.

And, opposing all that is the joyous fact that Jesus Christ has defeated Satan. We don't have to wait for end times for that; Jesus' victory was already accomplished some 2,000 years ago. As He alluded to in His parable, you can't ransack a strong man's house until the strong man has been bound. Folks, the strong man has been bound. He is doomed! The battle is over; the victory is won. The moment that Christ died on that cross, our sins were washed. The moment that Christ left the tomb, He showed the power that defeated sin, death and the power of the devil. It's over — and offered to each and every human being on the planet! As John confirmed in his first letter: ***The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work — I John 3:8b***. And with each passing day, we are one moment closer to Jesus sending Satan into the pits of eternal, everlasting hell, where he will be unable to impact anyone ever again.

Now Jesus made one more huge point that we must touch on before we close, and that is this: Words matter. Why? Words reflect our hearts. For Christians, the whole purpose of our words is to reflect the Father who loves us and the Savior who died for us and the Holy Spirit who is changing us — and telling the whole world about all of that. The greatest way we can short circuit our testimonies is to carelessly use words that have nothing to do with our lives in Christ, in other words, to simply make our words another platform for Satan's work. It's like they become neon in people's hearts and lives, forever illuminating a reminder to them of what they heard us say, and the tone with which we said it. It is a measure of God's amazing grace that the salvation He offers us through His Son is so deeply cleansing that it even forgives the verbal nonchalance we so often exhibit to those around us. But it is a measure of the equal depth of God's judgment that even our speech will be held to account.

## **CONCLUSION**

We serve an awesome, amazing God who, through His Son Jesus Christ, made the kingdom of God come upon us. And now we move, empowered by that kingdom, to impact this temporary kingdom of earth with all the wonders of God's wondrous love for us. Don't buy Satan's lies; they're worthless. Instead, reflecting what the psalmist said — ***The entirety of Your word is truth — Psalm 119:160a (NKJV)*** speak God's truth, so that all may know and believe and come into God's eternal kingdom. Let's pray!