

Article of the Month
July, 2017

“Idle Words”
— Matthew 12:36 —

The verse for our consideration reads:

“But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”

Here are the questions which may arise for us:

- (1) What constitutes an “idle” word?
- (2) What is meant by “word?”
- (3) Which “men” are being spoken of?
- (4) What is meant by “give account?”
- (5) “Day of Judgment” restricts who might be meant. Who is it?

The CONTEXT may very well give important clues for most of these questions. The PRIMARY context seems to begin in verse 22. Jesus casts out a demon. The Pharisees are worried that they will lose their influence with the people. They, therefore, say that Jesus is doing things by the power of the devil.

In verse 25, Jesus discerns their treacheries. And he reasons with them (and probably for the people’s sake) that even if Satan were casting out Satan, this would be a GOOD sign. It would be showing the end of his reign of terror. It would be showing that he must try ANYTHING to keep his old influences going — including the sacrificing of some of his own personal powers. But Jesus ALSO points out that the Jews were casting out Satan and that this might backfire on their reasoning — showing that their “children” (the disciples of the Pharisees) might ALSO be doing this by Satan’s power.

When we arrive at verse 28, Jesus allows that his casting out of demons BY GOD’S POWER is a sign that a representative of God’s kingdom IS AMONG THEM — and this, too, results in a kind of temporary restraint on Satan’s influences. It actually DID expose Satan’s errors as being promulgated by the Pharisees. Satan, at the first advent, DID have his powers restrained to a degree while Jesus and the Apostles were alive.

Verse 30 seems very important as a conclusion. Jesus says that there are TWO forces at work — those AGAINST him, and those FOR him. This division into two forces seems to

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be the preface for the next line of verses. Thus, the IMPLICATION of these following verses is that the Jewish leaders were in jeopardy, but the followers of Jesus would be escaping that jeopardy — all because one group was fighting truth with “idle words,” while the other group was sending out “The Word of Life.”

We’re getting close to the verse we are questioning. But this preliminary examination of context will help us to understand the problems inherent in the verse we are questioning. After all, NONE OF US desires to use “idle words” if the results are so very threatening. But the context is almost certainly DEFINING what Jesus means by idle words and to whom he is addressing the lesson.

It might be good, at this point, to see what the Strong’s Concordance tells us about the meaning of the term. “Idle” is S. #692. It is a compound word made up of S. #1 (the letter “A” —meaning NOT), and S. #2041, which means “to do work.” Thus “idle” apparently means NOT DOING WORK — or, NOT BUILDING. There MAY be a hidden implication in this. NOT BUILDING (i.e., being “idle”) may be a sin. It may IMPLY that some (BECAUSE they are doing no good) are actually doing evil. The context seems to be implying that. BECAUSE the Pharisees were doing evil (trying to trap Jesus — see verse 14), their actions might be what Jesus is construing as “idle” in the sense of DESTRUCTIVE — i.e., doing no good.

In verse 31, Jesus begins with “Therefore...” This means that what follows is BASED on what came before. What came before were the sinister ACCUSATIONS of the Pharisees. The leaders of Israel DID HAVE some sort of direction from the Holy Spirit. (See John 11:49-51 for evidence of this.) Jesus here says that sinning against that influence could not be forgiven. In other words, it WOULD have some kind of retribution. He specifies that their sin was BLASPHEMY. Blasphemy means EVIL SPEAKING. In other words, we are dealing with THE WORDS which the Pharisees were using as vehicles of attack on Jesus. They constituted “blasphemy” (evil speaking against Jesus and his good works). They KNEW BETTER! They KNEW they were attacking him to save their own power influences. They had enough influences of the Holy Spirit through the Law that they couldn’t plead ignorance.

Here we have an important ingredient for understanding. The word for “word” in verse 36 is S. #4487. It is not your usual word for “word.” It comes from a root (# 4483) which means a POURING FORTH. In other words, AN EXPOSITION — an idea rather than a specific singular word. Strong defines #4487 as “a matter or topic” (especially of narration or dispute). In other words, Jesus is referring to ARGUMENTS, TREATISES, and TEACHINGS which “do no work” — that is, which are groundless, destructive, or empty. They merely take up time to no avail. They are not true; therefore, they do not edify or build.

Jesus emphasizes the point in verse 32. He then makes a summarizing point in verses 33 through 35: He suggests that the Pharisees should realize that they cannot be trees of good fruit if they produce bad fruit. (In other words, Israel is DOOMED because it is producing no fruit or producing bad fruitage.)

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Now we have arrived at the verse in question. Here is a paraphrased summary:

VERSE 36. (Paraphrased)

“BUT...” I have just explained the matter to you, “but” I feel now an obligation to tell you about the CONSEQUENCES of your destructive actions. Every destructive (“not working”) teaching that men (in authority to teach — The Pharisees) insist upon WILL REQUIRE an explanation in the Judgment Day. Jesus is showing why, for instance, “it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you (Capernaum).” — Matthew 11:20-24. Responsibility is enhanced with knowledge. The Pharisees, in the Day of Judgment, will find themselves having to explain their former actions and to root out of their characters the horrible traits which made them challenge Jesus’ good words and works. This is what “idle words” really means.

Thus this verse IS NOT about the Church, because the Church’s judgment will be OVER by then. The Church is NOT a part of the “resurrection by JUDGMENT.” See John 5:29, NAS. (The King James in that verse is terrible!) The Church WILL NOT “give account...in the Day of Judgment.” This verse is directly and primarily aimed at the Jewish teachers at the first advent.

VERSE 37.

This verse cannot be left untouched because it is Jesus’ FINAL WORD on the subject:

“For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”

It is interesting and VITAL to know that the Greek for “words” in this verse is LOGOS. We know, of course, that “logos” has the meaning of “the entire idea or scheme of things behind a subject.” Thus this 37th verse literally PROVES that Jesus is NOT talking about careless word usage in verse 36. He is talking about the promotion of false doctrinal schemes. Israel was being rejected, at least in part, for erroneous preaching. This gives us in the Gospel Age reason to be very careful with the doctrines we promote. We could lose our “crowns” as the result of “idle words” — erroneous and harmful doctrinal positions. The text under consideration is not about us who live in this age; but its lesson is powerful as we try to develop characters which reflect our Lord.

Thus the verse has application to the promoters of falsehoods among the Jews. The LESSON has meaning for us as Christians — but the context seems to insist upon a first advent application.