Controversy Passages

Here we are again; we are looking at the Synoptic Gospels. We are just about to begin the eleventh unit of the twelve in this thirteenth lecture. We've looked so far at the historical Jesus, the Jewish background, the introduction to exegesis and the narrative genre, authorship and date, and also characteristics of the Synoptics, exegeting Jesus’ parables, the Gospels as literary works, the Synoptic Problem, geography of Palestine and Jerusalem, exegeting miracle accounts, and biblical theology of the Synoptics. Now we want to look at exegesis of controversy accounts or perhaps more broadly, controversy and dialogue accounts.

A controversy passage may take the form either of narrative—Jesus responding in a dialogue fashion to opponents; or of a discourse—a report of Jesus’ speech with some controversial topic. In either case there are certain things we need [to] think about in order to be sure we don’t misunderstand what is happening, so I think these are some items to keep in mind. Our first item to keep in mind has to do with what one might think of as historical background. Jesus may not be addressing the particular controversy you are concerned about since his first concern is with the controversy going on at his own time. If you’ve heard anything about the new perspective on Paul, that basically turns on something of that sort: that Paul’s writing were used heavily during the Reformation as the reformers tried to deal with the legalism of the Roman Catholic Church, and certain people connected with the new perspective have said that that is not the controversy that Paul had with the Judaizers at that particular time. Well, we’re not going to jump into that particular topic, but that sort of thing does occur, and you need to try and get a good feel for what is going on at the time. So that, then, is the item to keep in mind: you need to see what the controversy was at the time that we are talking about.

So what sort of things do you need to see? You need to try and figure out who were the opponents and where they coming from ideologically, theologically, practically,
something of that sort. Then the next thing you try to figure out is what Jesus’ view of
the matter is. That might actually involve looking at other passages than our particular
passage that you are interpreting, or preaching on, or teaching on. Here we need to be
careful since Jesus’ view of the matter might not be my view of the matter. After all, one
of the purposes of Scripture is to correct where we are messed up in one way or another,
and so that is what we kind of need to do. The purpose of Scripture is not looking around
for verses you can use to lay on your opponents; it is for finding out what the Scripture is
teaching, and you may have to lay that on yourself as well as on your opponents if you
like.

A fifth matter to consider is how is Jesus arguing for his position? Here it helps to
remember that Jesus’ opponents do not accept his claims, [although] the disciples accept
some of them and probably don’t know what some of them are. Jesus’ opponents are not
about to take his word for it, so the question is: can we understand his words as arguing
from where they are to where he is?

Sixth, something that comes up, I think a number of times when we are trying to
understand a writing that is from a different culture than ours, is that in this case, Jesus
may leave out some steps in an argument that may be easily understood by his original
audience or opponents, but [it] does not follow that we will understand him unless we can
supply those steps. I remember when I was working on my doctoral program at Cornell,
that in journal articles the authors would say that from this equation it may be easily
shown that this is so, and leave out a bunch of steps; and you need to try and work
through and try and figure out what those are if you want to understand what the writer is
saying. Well, when you are talking to somebody that already has the same background,
you may not say something like that, but that might still be true. So Jesus might leave out
some steps, and we need to be careful and try and see if we can figure out those.

And lastly, once we understand what Jesus is saying to his original opponents and
audience, we are then ready to see how this might carry over to us and to others living
today. One way of picturing this is as though the perspective back in the ancient times is
one horizon, and we are trying to take the perspective there and put it in our horizon, and
do it in a fair way so that we are dealing with the biblical material in a satisfactory manner.

Well, as I’ve done for the miracles and the parables, I want to give a walkthrough of the controversy and dialogue accounts in the Synoptics. So this is a list of passages that more or less fall into the genre, and here one of them will be a controversy between John the Baptist and the Pharisees rather than between Jesus and his opponents; but the rest of them are with Jesus. So the incident, or pericope, first of all: John the Baptist is preaching in Matthew 3 and Luke 3. There he is dealing with the Pharisees and some of the others who are not repenting, basically, and so he is trying to get them to see the seriousness of the situation. Then there is the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 and Luke 4: temptation in the wilderness, where you’ve got a dialogue and also a controversy, if you like, between Jesus and Satan, showing how Satan was trying to turn Jesus aside.

The Sermon on the Mount, in at least that section in 5:17-47, is obviously some sort of controversy account. Jesus has just said that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you’ll never enter into heaven, if you like. Then he said, “You heard that it is said, but I say unto you…” It appears from thinking through those that we are working with how the Pharisees handle various Old Testament passages, or extend various Old Testament passages, and what Jesus is having to say regarding it: “Well, this is what they are really about, and this is what you need to do with them.”

Moving on, there is the dialogue, controversy, if you like, regarding the man with leprosy in Matthew 8, Mark 1, and Luke 5; the cost of following Jesus in Matthew 8 and Luke 9; the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9, Mark 2, and Luke 5--remember that is the one where they lower him down through the roof and then Jesus says, rather strikingly, to him, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” The controversy then is at first—basically in the minds of the Pharisees—who can forgive sin but God alone?

The calling of Matthew is what we will probably call more dialogue, but in chapter 9 of Matthew and chapter 2 of Mark, and 5 of Luke, there is a question regarding fasting; [and] in the same three chapters: the dead girl and the sick woman in Matthew 9,
Mark 5, and Luke 8. John the Baptist’s question, "Are you the one that should come; are you the one who is to come, or are we to look for someone else?" In Matthew 11 and Luke 7 Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath.

In Matthew 12, Mark 2, and Luke 6, is one of the controversies—one of the Sabbath controversies: Jesus is going through the wheat fields, and his disciples [are] picking grain and rubbing it with their hands and eating the food, if you like, which Pharisees would have seen as reaping and winnowing and such.

Then there is the healing the fellow with the shriveled hand in Matthew 12, Mark 3, and Luke 6.

[Then] the Jesus and Beelzebul controversy, and that’s one that we’re going to come back and look at in some detail in Matthew 12, Mark 3, and Luke 11. Next is the sign of Jonah in Matthew 12 and Luke 11, and Jesus’ mother and brothers in Matthew 12, Mark 3, and Luke 8. Then there are the controversies over clean and unclean in Matthew 15, and Mark 7; and the Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. Next is the demand for a sign in Matthew 16, Mark 8; Peter’s confession, Matthew 16, Mark 8, Luke 9. Jesus predicts his death, Matthew 16, Mark 8, Luke 9, and then the demonized boy in Matthew 17, Mark 9, [and] Luke 9.

Then there’s the temple tax question in Matthew 17, not to be confused with the render to Caesar passage later on. This one is the guys who go around collecting the half-shekel temple tax [and] ask if Jesus pays the temple tax; and Peter says, “Well, yeah, sure.” Then when he comes back to Jesus, perhaps a few minutes or an hour or so later, Jesus beats him to the punch and says, “From whom do the kings of the earth collect taxes, from their own royal family or from others?” Peter knows the answer to that. The typical tax-exempt people in antiquity were people who were in the royal family, and the nobility, and that sort of thing. So he gives the right answer to that, and Jesus says, “So the sons are free.” The implication then is that Jesus and his disciples don’t need to pay the temple tax anymore, but then he says so that the people won’t be offended, “You go out.” Peter goes out and catches this fish, and it’s got the right size coin in its mouth to pay for Jesus and Peter’s temple tax.
Then there is the debate among the disciples, over who is the greatest; we don’t actually hear the details of the debate, but Jesus’ response to it is given in Matthew 18, Mark 9 and Luke 9. And then the whole matter of divorce which comes up in Matthew 19 [and] Mark 10 leading to a dialogue [with] the question about the little children coming to Jesus, Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18; and [then] the rich young ruler coming to Jesus in Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18.

There is the mother’s request, that’s James and John’s mother’s request, in Matthew 20, Mark 10; cleansing of the Temple in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19; Jesus’ authority is questioned after that, and that’s in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 20. The paying taxes to Caesar [follows] which was mentioned a few minutes ago, Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 20.

Then the Sadducee’s question about marriage and resurrection comes up in Matthew 22, Mark 12 and Luke 20 as well, then the scribes question about what’s the greatest commandment, Matthew 22, Mark 12; and then Jesus’ counter question: “Who is the Messiah?” They say, “Well, he’s the Son of David,” and then Jesus asked, “Why then does David call him Lord?” In the patriarchal society the ancestor doesn’t call the descendent “Lord,” so something else is going on is the implication; that’s in Matthew 22, Mark 12, Luke 20. Then there is the anointing at Bethany, Matthew 26, Mark 14; Peter’s denial predicted, Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22; the dialog at Gethsemane in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22; Jesus’ arrest in the same chapters; Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Matthew 26, Mark 14. Finally, “He that is not against us is for us” is found in Mark 9, and Luke 9. We’ve now finished the ones that are in Matthew and some of the Gospels. Then there are those that are offered just in Mark but not in Matthew.

The ones that are just in Luke are: Jesus at age twelve, Luke 2; Jesus' rejection at Nazareth, Luke 4; and the great catch of fish, Luke 5; Jesus anointed, Luke 7:36-50. He’s anointed a couple of different times; this is the one where he’s at Simon the Pharisees’ house: this woman puts ointment on his feet, weeps on his feet, and then wipes his feet with her hair. There is a rather striking example of one of Jesus' arguments there.

If you were kind of thinking those over in your mind and we whipped through them, you noticed that some of them are miracles, some of them are parables, and some of them are something else. So some miracles involve a dialogue or a controversy. Jesus' miracles on the Sabbath invariably produce controversies, and Jesus’ parables were often responses to some kind of controversies.

Well, we want to walk our way through and think through one of these in some detail, and that is the casting out demons by Beelzebul in Luke 11. We’re going to start back in verse 14 and go down to 28. Luke tells us, “And he,” that is Jesus, “was casting out a demon, and it was mute, and it happened when the demon had come out that the mute man spoke, and the crowd marveled.” So we’ve got a kind of miracle account there, even with the crowd's response there.

But that’s just kind of the introduction to verse 15: “But certain of them said, ‘By Beelzebul the ruler of demons he casts out demons.’ Others, testing him, began to seek [or were seeking] a sign from heaven from him. But he, by knowing their thoughts, said to them ‘every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a house divided against a house falls. Now if indeed Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand, for you are saying by Beelzebul I'm casting out demons. Now if I'm casting out demons by Beelzebul, by whom are your sons casting them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if by the finger of God I am casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Whenever a strong man, fully armed guards his own house-courtyard, his possessions are safe. But as soon as one stronger than he comes and conquers him, he
takes away his armor in which he had trusted and he distributes his spoils [or distributes his weapons]. He who is not with me is against me, and he who is not gathering with me is scattering.

"When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest. Not finding any, he says 'I'll return to my house from which I departed.' He comes and finds it swept and ordered. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits worse than himself, and they come and dwell there; and the last circumstances of that man are worse than the first.

"Now it happened while he was saying these things that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast you sucked,' but he said, On the contrary: blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it'."

Let's kind of walk through those verses and look at a couple things that have to do with the Greek, and then we'll come back and think about the passage as a whole.

In verse 15, “Certain of them said, ‘By Beelzebul the ruler of demons he casts out demons.’” We look at the parallel passage in Matthew—they're described as Pharisees; and if we look at the parallel passage in Mark, they're described as scribes from Jerusalem, and that reminds us of something fairly important. If you're working through a passage, you should check and see whether it's got parallels, which in the Gospels that's not uncommon, and then read over those and make sure you don't do anything in your interpretation that contradicts one of the parallel passages. That's kind of a first order thing; one which, by the way, is not always observed by liberals because of their theories of what's going on with the history of it and things of that sort.

Verse 16, “Others, testing him, begin to seek a sign from heaven.” That actually connects us out beyond our context to verse 29 where that comes up again, but we're not dealing with that here. Then he goes on and begins to respond to them in verse 19, “Now if I'm casting out demons by Beelzebul, by whom are you casting them out?”

This is a good example of an “if construction,” which in some of your older grammars was called a “true to fact if,” but in more recent years the grammarians have
seen that those are, in fact, what we may call “logical ifs.” That is, if this is true, then this is what follows from it; but I'm not granting that this is true. Jesus is obviously not granting that he's casting out demons by Beelzebul.

“Whenever a strong man fully armed” is a way of translating the beginning of verse 21, but it actually has a definite article in front of “strong man,” and some people have wondered and thought in terms of Jesus' hinting that this is he, etc. But that's just the generic use of a definite article, and yes indeed, when you look at how the parable sets up, Jesus is representing himself as the strong man, but not from that hint in the Greek there.

What else is going on here of note in the Greek? There is a pluperfect that shows up in verse 22 which [is] “he had trusted,” which is pretty rare in our New Testament Greek.

Then we get the generic use the definite article down with the unclean spirit in verse 24, which I translate “an unclean spirit.” That pretty well takes care of the notable Greek things, I guess, going on in our passage.

The next thing I took a look here is at the elements of narrative in this particular incident. This is a narrative with an implied dialogue. Well, you actually do have the Pharisees saying he's casting out demons by Beelzebul, and actually Jesus responds to that, [and that] is what's going on in most of this [discussion]. Then you have this woman at the end [saying], “Blessed is the womb that bore you,” and then Jesus responds to that, and there's one [instance of] seeking the sign up earlier, and he will pick that up just past our passage. So we're looking at a kind of a complicated dialogue here when, in fact, you're addressing a crowd, [and] you can have various people say something from the crowd.

But it's also a narrative. So what are the elements in the narrative here, [i.e.] actors or characters? Well, there's Jesus. There are the unnamed opponents, which are described further for us in Matthew and Mark as scribes and Pharisees. There are some others who are not identified for us, and then there's this woman.

Then there are some actions. Jesus heals a mute who is demonized. The opponents
claim he is working by Beelzebul—we may come back and think about who Beelzebul is. Others are seeking a heavenly sign.” Jesus responds to those claiming he's working by satanic powers, [but] a woman interrupts by blessing his mother and Jesus responds to her. Then, just out of where we stopped our passage, Jesus responds to those seeking a sign. Scenes [are] not specified, but presumably this is all one scene in that sense. He's speaking to them under some circumstances. The plot, well, the various responses to Jesus are dealt with by him—that's the main plot, you might say.

So the opposition to Jesus attempts to discredit Jesus perhaps are answered, and perhaps we could say with the woman's remark that a distraction is refocused, perhaps. We do have two or three examples where somebody says something to Jesus, and it's a distraction in some sense. It carries them away from what's going on, trying to carry the audience away from what's going on.

Remember the guy who wanted Jesus to arbitrate in a dispute with his brother over dividing the inheritance and Jesus does respond to it? But in some sense it's a distraction.

So the controversy and its background: Who is Beelzebul? These, by the way, were questions I put on a study sheet for my students to think through on their own and then to discuss in class. Who's Beelzebul? What are Jesus' opponents saying when they accuse him of casting out demons by Beelzebul? Well, our narrative itself identifies Beelzebul as the ruler of demons. That doesn't automatically make him Satan because Satan may have some, as C.S. Lewis calls it, “lowerarchy” under him. So this guy might be someone else there. The name comes from Baal the standard word for “lord” and which became a name for a god, yet probably a god with different locations rather than seen as different gods. And so specifically the god Baal here combined with zebul, and that has various possible meanings, and even has over the centuries also been ended with a “b” instead of an “l.” So you have “Beelzebub,” as well as “Beelzebul.” The various meanings “filth,” “lord of filth,” obviously is not complimentary, “lord prince,” “lord of the dwelling,” etc. Whether Beelzebul is to be understood as a synonym for Satan, or as a name of one of his underlings who is over the demons, is really not clear; that’s a trickier question. We certainly do have warrant from the Old Testament and from remarks of Paul
in the New Testament that satanic and demonic powers lie behind false religions of various sorts that we can see. What is clear is that the opponents are charging Jesus with using satanic power, probably because this is what they believe, but also to discredit him with the crowd.

If you try and back up and look at this with the perspective of the Pharisees who have moved into opposition, or the scribes who are in the same kind of category, they’ve got the problem that Jesus is doing miracles that no one has been doing for some centuries. In fact, there is a huge problem, if you think about it, that when you analyze Jesus’ miracles that they’re in the same ballpark with Moses and Elijah and Elisha and such. So what are you going to do about that? Well, that kind of background is going to be rather important in regard to Jesus’ answer. So what they have to really do is—if they’re not going to admit that Jesus is who he claims to be—they’re going to have to assign him having demonic powers.

We have some of that same situation going on, say, a generation ago when non-charismatics were responding to charismatics and such. Perhaps it’s blown over to a certain extent now, though non-charismatics are still suspicious when miracles are done and, of course, are rightly, I think, trying to examine them against Scripture, and see whether that’s fair or not.

So what’s the controversy that Jesus is addressing? Well that’s really pretty straightforward. The question is what is the real source of Jesus power? Who are his opponents here? Where are they coming from? Well as it’s been pointed out a couple of times, the opponents are not specified in Luke; but Matthew 12:24 identifies them as Pharisees, and Mark 3:22 as teachers of the law who had come down from Jerusalem. They cannot deny that Jesus is doing miraculous works, but since they’re unwilling to accept these as from God, then they must be from Satan.

So the question here in this passage is how is Jesus arguing for his position? Can you spot any places where Jesus might be leaving out some steps in his argument because his opponents or the audience might not need them? Well, I went through then verses 17-26, and that’s basically what I urged my students to do and try to see if they can divide
that up into distinct arguments. It doesn't hurt them to dig out the verses and look at them again.

It looks like 17 and 18 are some kind of an argument from a divided kingdom: “He knowing their thoughts said, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a house divided against itself falls. Now indeed, if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?’” And then an explanatory note, “Because you are saying by Beelzebul I'm casting out demons.” He perhaps says that at the end because, perhaps, some of the people in the crowd don't hear what the opponents are saying.

Then verse 19 seems to be a slightly different argument. Obviously, these are linked together in some way, and I’ve labeled it “You’re Exorcists.” “Now, if I'm casting out demons by Beelzebul, by whom are your sons casting them out?” And “sons” here might be “disciples,” etc. And it’s probably fair to say the Pharisees had exorcists of one sort or another. Josephus makes reference to exorcism taking place. His example actually connects it with Essenes, but it wouldn’t be unreasonable that the Pharisees also had something of a sort.

And then verse 20: I have “Kingdom Come” here as my label for the argument. Jesus says, “But if by the finger of God I’m casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” So he is arguing, “If I'm miraculously casting out demons, that says something about the coming of the kingdom.” That carries us back into the discussion of biblical theology, the Synoptic there, just last time where this would be one of the evidences that the kingdom has come, if you like.

Then verse 21 and 22 I label “Strong and Stronger,” whenever a strong man fully armed guards his own courtyard, his possessions are safe; but as soon as one stronger than he comes and conquers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and distributes his spoils, his property (or his weapons) which he’s been using to defend himself.”

Verse 23 I take to be another argument: “No Neutrality.” “He who is not with me is against me, and he who is not gathering with me is scattering.” Then we get a somewhat puzzling section in verses 24 through 26, which I call: “The Spirit's House”:
“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; not finding any, he says, ‘I’ll return to my house from which I departed.’ When he comes and finds it swept and ordered, then he goes and he brings seven other spirits worse than himself. They come in and dwell there, and the last circumstance in this man are worse than the first.”

All of these respond to the opponents' tactic of explaining away Jesus’ miracle as satanic. They appear to argue something like this (we're filling in steps if you like): Verses 17 and 18, “Divided Kingdom”; “In view of Satan’s warfare with God,” that would be the pharisaic view of the matter as well as Jesus’ view of the matter. Can Satan afford to divide his forces in the face of God? When you look through battles in ancient history and in modern history, etc., often a clever tactician will divide his forces and bring one around, and that often works; but it works because the opposing general doesn’t know what’s happening.

Now try and bring that into the spiritual realm. Satan is going to try and divide his forces because God doesn’t know it is happening? This is not going to work. So can Satan afford to do that? After all, God is not a human general from whom troop movements might be hidden, or one who might be out-witted. Isn’t Satan taking a real chance that God will intervene to destroy him? Satan does not know the future well enough to know that he may not be defeated in a particular thing if he doesn’t do the right, the “safe” thing: the thing that will work to his advantage.

Verse 19, “You’re Exorcists,” goes something like this: “On what basis can you make a distinction between my exorcisms and those of your pharisaic exorcists? Are yours more powerful? Are they more efficient? And if they’re not, and you guys are working from God, and you guys are not as powerful or as efficient, etc., that argument isn’t going to run too well.” Then in verse 20, “If by the finger of God I’m casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” It looks like Jesus' use of the phrase “Finger of God” is intended to recall Exodus 8:19 where the Egyptian magicians, in competing with Moses, finally when God guides Moses to bring the gnats in, the magicians can’t match it; and so they say this power comes from God; this is God’s
power. But if Jesus’s miracles come from God, you then have to face the fact that in him God’s kingdom has come, and you then have to respond on that basis rather than trying to dismiss it as satanic.

Verses 21 and 22, “Strong and Stronger” argument looks like this: in fact, Jesus’s power to cast out demons shows, like the defeat of an armed warrior and another by the plundering of his property, Jesus has defeated and plundered Satan. He has taken away Satan’s captives and set them free, if you like.

Verse 23, “No Neutrality”: there was no neutrality in this war: you are either on God’s side or you’re on Satan’s side; if you are not for me then you are against me; if you are not cooperating with me, then you are working against me.

Now verses 24 and 26 are puzzling in several ways. Verses 24 and 26 are some kind of a narrative: “When an unclean spirit goes out of a man and passes through water for a place seeking rest, not finding any he says, ‘I will return to my house,’ and comes to find it is swept and ordered; he brings with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they come and dwell there,” etc. It appears to be a parable; the picture of what happens to a man who has been delivered from demon possession.

As it happens a couple other places in Scripture, the person is pictured as a house in some sense, and the demons as people living in the house. We have a picture that is a little bit that way where Paul pictures our current body as a tent and the resurrection body as a house; and we, as presumably the souls, dwell in it, if you like. So, we’ve got something like that here. And basically this parable seems to picture what happens to a man who's been delivered from demon possession. If there is no power placed within him to resist [the] demonic, they return. So that’s what seems to be going on.

I am guessing that it’s a parable, but Jesus doesn’t always tell us when he is speaking in parables. The comparison then seems to be that if Israel or if the people he is speaking to individually reject Jesus after all this miraculous power has been displayed, then they would be overwhelmed when the demonic forces return. That would be my read of that. That’s a little tricky on what to make of that, but that’s the direction I would
suggest going with this particular response. So, it’s a kind of a warning then at the end of these remarks.

Does the remark by the woman and Jesus’s response in verses 27 and 28 fit in to this? Or is it a new pericope or a new incident? I am not sure whether this is a new incident or not; it’s very short if it is. Besides, verse 16, “Others Seeking a Sign,” seems to connect with verse 29 after the passage we are discussing: “That is a wicked generation that seeks for a sign.” So I think, of course, it’s probably not. Maybe our idea of dividing everything into pericopes is a little artificial in places, so that might be a problem there. If this is the last or next to the last item in this pericope, its connection to the rest may not be physical birth. It maybe that not physical birth, but obedience is what counts, and that a proper relation to God is an even greater blessing than bearing the Messiah. You say, “How would that come up?” Well, a woman brought it up, and so from Jesus’ perspective, during his time of humiliation, his time of conception to his resurrection or ascension if you like, he does not make use of his divine powers all the time. He is surprised by things various times. So, this may be a surprise that the woman throws in, and yet Jesus responds well to it, if you like. Again, it would continue to be a warning that here are these people who think they are safe because they are Israel. As this happened a couple other times in salvation history, but rejecting the Messiah is really going to muck things up. And so it is a correct response to God—not being close to the Messiah, even to be his mother [that counts]. This is not a great passage for Roman Catholic Mariology, as a matter of fact, but that’s not what it’s primarily about.

So that is my reading there. I think that obedience rather than physical birth is what counts: how you respond to Jesus rather than how you are related to him in a physical sense, and that proper relation to God is an even greater blessing than bearing the Messiah.

The last question I asked on my study sheet was: What implications do you see in this response of Jesus to the various controversies which you might encounter today? Well, let’s see; we might summarize the arguments in verses 17-22, and I will go back here to pull those out for you. They would be: “Divided kingdom,” “Your Exorcists,”
“Kingdom Come,” and “Strong and Stronger.” How would you handle those? We might summarize the arguments in verses 17-22 as pointing to our responsibility to use sound judgment rather than using partiality for our particular group for what we are in, or special pleading, and to deal fairly with the evidence God provides rather than letting our presuppositions control us. That is good advice for any age. The Jews of Jesus’ time were faced with a rather difficult situation! Jesus wasn’t exactly what they were expecting in the direction of the Messiah. On top of that, he went against some of the theological views that the Sadducees held, some theological views that the Pharisees held, and people who belonged to those groups who were seriously trying to follow God had to deal with that matter and try and rethink their position. That might happen to us in our own Christian life. If something we held turns out to be wrong, that perhaps we thought we were interpreting the Bible but we weren’t properly doing so, that sometimes shows up. We are not infallible. So we need to deal fairly with the evidence that God provides rather than letting our presuppositions control us.

Verse 23 reminds us that finally there is no neutrality when it comes down to what we will do with Jesus, not back then and not today.

Verses 24-26 suggests that the blessings we have cannot last without our being in proper relationship with God, and as we can see from other passages then, even if we don’t seem to be getting any blessings at the moment, if we are clinging to God, trying to do the right thing, a blessing will come one day. We just need to be ready to wait for it.

Verses 27-28 indicate that there is no greater blessing than knowing and loving God. So with that, we will stop.

Any of these passages you could get more profit from with further work on them, but basically, as I tell my students in a course like this, you are typically going to be preparing a Bible study or a sermon; you are not writing a dissertation, and so you need to spend what will be a reasonable time along with your other duties to try and understand the passage better. That is kind of what we are doing here.

So, that is enough for today, and we will see you, Lord willing, at our next session.