

“The Unforgiveable Sin”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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(Mt. 12:22-37)

Introduction.

There was once a young man whose family always attended church, but there came a point in time when the boy asked his parents if he could sit with his friends instead of his family during the worship services. His parents agree to the request, but unfortunately it wasn't long before the young boy began to skip church and play hooky with his friends. In an effort to ensure that their son was indeed going to worship, they boy's parents made it a regular practice of asking him what the sermon was about. However, this didn't present too great a problem, because he always picked up a copy of the bulletin and read the sermon title before slipping out. So he was able to give an intelligible response to the question whenever his parents asked.

Everything was going well for the boy with this practice, and he thought he was very clever, until one Sunday his parents asked him, “Son, what was the sermon about today?” He had read the title in the bulletin, so he replied, “It was about sin.” However, the parents then asked the unexpected follow-up question, “And what did the pastor say about sin?” The boy thought for a moment, he grew nervous and wondered what he could say to get out of this one, and then he finally answered, “He was against it!”

In His earthly ministry Jesus talked a number of times about sin, and He said that the good news of the gospel is that God has made His grace and forgiveness available to everyone and that by His death He would pay the penalty for all our sin – that is with the exception of one, the unforgiveable sin, as it is called. And Jesus speaks to this particular matter in the passage before us this morning. What exactly is the unforgiveable sin, what did Jesus have to say about it, and how does it mesh with the Bible's message of grace and forgiveness?

I. The Accusation of the Pharisees.

“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. All the people were astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’ (Mt. 12:22-24).

Jesus' words about the unforgiveable sin occur within the context of a miraculous healing of a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and the text indicates that the former problem was the cause of the latter two. The healing itself is related to us very briefly, because it isn't so much the miracle itself that captures center stage in this story but the confrontation that follows.

Some of the people who witnessed the miracle were astonished, and they began to wonder out loud, "Could this man be the Son of David?" NT scholar Dale Bruner points out that the Son of David is a royal title rooted in Nathan's prophecy in the OT in 2 Samuel 7. In that passage the prophet said that one of David's descendant would become a king forever, so the title came to hold the messianic hopes of Israel. Ever since David, Israel had been looking for the appearance of this eternal Son of David, and now some were beginning to wonder if, in fact, Jesus might be the Messiah promised long ago.

However, when the Pharisees heard people saying this they said, "It is only by Beelzebub that this fellow drives out demons." Now, we really don't know where the name Beelzebub comes from, and it occurs in the NT only four times. Some scholars have suggested that it comes from the Hebrew word *ba'alzebul*, which means "lord of the flies" and that it is a mocking takeoff on *ba'al aebul*, which means "prince of Baal." Baal was a pagan god of the Canaanites. However, we really don't know the origin. What we do know is that Beelzebub is identified in the NT as the prince of demons, which means the devil himself. What the Pharisees were saying is that Jesus was really using the power of the devil to drive out demons.

This isn't the first time people have called good evil and evil good. It has happened in every generation, and one of the confusing things about being a Christian today in a post-Christian culture is the way in which we as believers are made to feel strange and out of step when we try to live the way we know God wants us to. It's a tragic thing when people invert the truth and label good evil and evil good, and every generation has tended to do this in one way or another.

Theologian David Wells has said, "Worldliness is that force which makes sin look normal and righteousness strange."¹ For example, think of the word "virginity." It used to be that virginity was the crown of virtue, something that was admired and held up as the model for sexual purity before a person got married. But now the word is mocked by many people today. It's suggested that virginity isn't a desirable quality, that a virgin is someone who is inexperienced, immature, and ignorant. There was even a movie made several years back that was a comedy which made fun of it, and the film's title was *Forty-Year-Old Virgin*. How far we have fallen in our society!

I was at a wedding a number of years ago, and the pastor who performed the ceremony shocked the audience when he announced that during the wedding when

the groom kissed the bride at the end of the service it would only be the second time they had kissed in their entire courtship. So precious to them was the gift of sex, so committed was this couple to sexual purity, and to be virgins when they got married, that they raised the bar and put a hedge of protection around their sexuality. They wanted to have an unblemished gift to present to their partner on their wedding night, and they did.

Some would say, “That’s too old-fashioned. It’s out of step with the world today. It’s too Pollyanna for me.” While this isn’t something I would urge all couples to do, I say, “What a remarkable commitment to seeking God and trying to live a life of purity that honors Him. Thanks be to God that there are people in the world today who still take seriously what the Bible says about sexual purity and don’t care what the world thinks.” The lives of this bride and groom were marked by courage, discipline, purity, and the blessing of God – something this world is sadly lacking these days.

In the OT the prophet Isaiah relates in a series of woes and judgments that God says, “*Woe to those who call good evil and evil good, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter*” (5:20). God has harsh words for those who mock the truth and seek to invert it, and when the Pharisees sought to attribute the work of Jesus to the work of the devil, I suspect these words of Isaiah might have come to mind.

II. The Defense of Jesus.

The passage continued in verse 25 where it says, “*Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them,*” and then in verses 25-29 the Lord went on to challenge the theology behind the accusation of the Pharisees in three different ways. First, Jesus said that if He was removing evil, how could He be doing it *through* evil without leading to evil’s self-destruction? Every kingdom divided against itself can’t stand. It will fall.

Second, Jesus said that there were those among the Pharisees who also cast out demons on occasion. Since Christ was able to do this even more powerfully than these Pharisees, by what power did they think they were casting out demons? What made their ability to do it different from His?

Finally, Jesus challenged the accusation of the Pharisees by saying that no one can get into a strong man’s house until the strong man is bound and neutralized. Therefore, the very fact that Jesus had been able to successfully invade Satan’s territory was proof that the devil was bound by Him, and the evil one was powerless to resist. It wasn’t by the power of evil that Jesus performed His miracles. It was through the power of God.

I’m impressed with the cleverness of Jesus and His ability to engage in debate in the world of ideas. His logic rendered His opponents speechless, and they had

no rebuttal, no rejoinder. If you ever want to get into a debate with Jesus, you better come ready. I can imagine people in the crowd whispering to one another, “That Jesus is one bright dude. Did you see how He silenced the Pharisees and shut down their arguments?”

However, as impressed as I am with the cleverness of Christ, I am even more impressed with the fact that He never used His power of debate to belittle or put down the common person, only those who were filled with pride or who challenged Him. The power of Jesus’ mind was never a weapon to wound, only to defend.

III. The Warning of Jesus.

The passage continues, “*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 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*” (Mt. 12:30-32).

This is one of the most confusing sayings of Jesus in all of the NT. Isn’t the grace of God deep enough and wide enough to cover every sin we commit? Does God limit His grace and forgiveness to every sin except one? What exactly is the unforgiveable sin, or as sometimes it’s called, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

Over the centuries commentators have given a variety of answers. In the course of my study in preparation for this sermon I read a number of interpretations. There was even one in a book by the Dutch NT scholar G.K. Berkhouwer that was 31 pages long! (If you have trouble sleeping at night, I have a recommendation for you!) The explanation that makes the most sense to me is that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is really the sin of unbelief. The context of Jesus’ saying here is that the Pharisees had been attributing to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit. From what they said you can see that they weren’t speaking out of ignorance; they were consciously rejecting the work of God through Christ.

Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit isn’t an arbitrary curse or some foolish remark about either God or the Holy Spirit *per se*. Rather, it’s trying to discredit Jesus in the eyes of others and to suggest that the work He did was done by the power of the devil. That’s what the Pharisees were trying to do in this passage.

And Jesus said there is no forgiveness for a sin like that. There is no forgiveness because it’s the sin of unbelief. This isn’t to say that God’s grace is limited or that the Lord somehow puts a restriction on His forgiveness. Rather, what it means is that in their rejection of Jesus and the denial of the work of God through His Son, people who willfully turn away from Christ and reject the work of God available to them in Christ invite condemnation. They have turned away

from the only One who is able to save them, and in their unbelief and rebellion they reject Jesus and refuse to repent. That's what this is all about, and such a person has no desire to ask for forgiveness.

I remember a young man who came to me several years ago, and he was very anxious and worried that somehow he had committed the unforgiveable sin. I asked him what he had done, and he told me that in a moment of anger over a broken relationship he had cursed God and had said many mean and foul things to the Lord.

I asked him, "Is that all you've done?" He looked at me in amazement. And I went on to say, "Welcome to the club, brother! The Bible is full of people who've been angry with God, and their words are recorded in the pages of Scripture. And every single one of them was forgiven for the hateful things they said." I went on to explain what the unforgiveable sin really is, the sin of unbelief, of rejecting Jesus and ascribing to the devil His divine work. And I closed by assuring him that if he was worried about having committed the unforgiveable sin, that was the surest sign that indeed he had not done it, because the heart that doesn't believe is the one that isn't open to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin. This young man's sensitivity to these things should actually be an encouragement to him.

If you're concerned about whether or not you've committed the unforgiveable sin, if there is worry in your heart this morning, then hear me when I say the most remarkable thing about this passage is that Jesus clearly assumes that every other sin and blasphemy will and can be forgiven in our lives. And it's against this backdrop of the wide and gracious mercy of God that Jesus' warning stands in such stark contrast. He loves you, and He wants the best for you. And He will forgive you if you only turn to Him and ask, no matter what you've done. The choice is yours.

Conclusion.

Once there was a man who dressed up in a devil costume to wear to a Halloween party. As he was walking to the party, it began to rain so heavily that he needed to take shelter. So he ran for cover to the next building he could find. It happened to be a church, and there was a worship service going on. He made a rather dramatic entrance dripping wet dressed like the devil, and the congregation panicked and everyone ran out of the sanctuary. Everyone except one unfortunately woman who hid under a pew. As the man came near her, the woman pleaded, "You know, I've really been on your side all along!"

As I close this morning, let me ask you, "Whose side are you on today? Where do you stand with Christ?" In His rebuke of the Pharisees Jesus said, "*He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters*" (12:30).

Here Jesus explains that it really is impossible to remain neutral about Him. Either you are for Jesus, or you're against Him. It's just that simple.

You might say, "But Peter, I'm not against Christ. I just haven't made up my mind about Jesus yet." Let me say to you as gently as I can, not to decide is to decide. In our relationship with Christ there can be no neutrality. The claims of the kingdom and the demands of Jesus for discipleship don't allow us to remain neutral. We've got to decide.

There was a high school student who thought about going out for the school play, and auditions were coming up. He couldn't make up his mind. He thought, "Do I want to try out, or don't I? I'm not really sure. Maybe I won't be selected, but maybe I'll be given a part. Maybe I would be good, but then maybe I'd blow it and forget my lines. What should I do? I don't know." The day came for the auditions, and the young man continued to vacillate until the auditions were over. His indecision was a decision, and he wasn't in the play.

Today the Lord is calling your name to be part of His heavenly kingdom. He invites you to join in the drama of His salvation. What will your answer be? How will you respond to His invitation? The choice is yours. Amen.

¹ David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p. unknown.