**The Unforgivable Sin**

Mark 3:20-30

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A couple weeks ago when the pastoral team was out for our Tuesday lunch, I jokingly told Pastor Tim that I thought I was going to take a sick day today because our preaching text is a tough one. When I asked him if he would cover for me, he just smiled and said, *“No problem.”* He asked what the topic was and I told him that it’s the unforgivable sin. He then wanted to know what I thought it was. Now it was my turn to smile: *“The unforgivable sin is not liking cheese curds, brats or the Green Bay Packers.”* To which he replied, *“Then, I guess a bunch of us will be facing judgment.”*

While that might be funny, our topic for today is no laughing matter.

Let me tell you about a man I knew from one of the previous places we lived. I’m going to call him Tom, though that is not his real name. He never attended the church I pastored but that didn’t stop me from reaching out to him. Tom was tormented. Whenever I saw him his shoulders were drooped, his face had no affect, he talked slowly and he shuffled as he walked. When I would ask him how he was doing, he would often say something like this: *“Not good. I’m really worried.”* I would then ask him why he was worried and invariably he would answer, *“Pastor, I’ve committed the unforgivable sin and I’m going to Hell.”* I spent hours with him over the course of many years, trying everything I could think of to help him find forgiveness for whatever was tormenting him. As far as I know, he has still not found freedom.

Before we dive in, let me make a few introductory remarks.

1. **While we address various teaching topics at Edgewood, my preaching preference is verse-by-verse exposition** where we work our way through a book of the Bible, like we are doing with the Gospel of Mark. There are many advantages to this approach but at the top is the fact that I’m forced to deal with topics that might not make their way into a felt-need kind of sermon series. If our preaching diet were to be totally topical, we’d avoid the tough texts and end up swimming only on the surface.
2. **The Bible is an amazing, life-changing book that feeds our soul by providing both spiritual milk and spiritual meat to help us grow.** I am filled up this week after Beth and I heard from preachers like John MacArthur, Matt Chandler and David Platt at the Together for the Gospel Conference in Louisville, where 10,000 pastors and church leaders from 50 different countries gathered. I am so grateful that the deacons give the pastoral team a budget to attend conferences like this. I feel rested and refreshed. Here’s a brief clip of what the opening song sounded like.

**🡪 Play video clip.**

1. **To top all of that off, to attend the Iron Sharpens Iron Conference men’s conference with over 100 men from Edgewood, was very moving.** I can’t wait to see what God will do in, and through men, as God calls us to be tender warriors for Him.
2. **It’s good for us to emphasize again the importance of context when dealing with difficult verses.** New Testament scholar D.A. Carson often quotes his father who said, *“A text out of context is a pretext for a proof text.”* One of the keys to effective Bible study is to *let the Bible interpret itself.* That’s why we study the context, do word studies from the original languages, focus on verb tenses and look at cross-references. As we will see today, all of this is extremely helpful in understanding the unforgivable sin.

I’m praying that our passage for today will comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. There’s a warning here about the horrible reality that one could be utterly and totally forsaken by God, judged with His righteous judgment and sent to the everlasting flames of hell.

We saw last week that in dealing with the crowds, Jesus healed many with diseases and freed many who were demonized. He ministered to the public but He also drove truth into people in a very personal way.

We learned that *if we want to move from being a fickle fan to become a faithful follower,* we must cultivate these three qualities.

* **Be in the presence of Jesus**
* **Go and proclaim Jesus**
* **Use the power of Jesus**

There was always a reaction when Jesus preached. People didn’t just sit passively or sleep during his sermons. They either embraced Him or attacked Him. They bowed before Him or blasted Him. As we continue in our passage, we see two strong responses. The first is from those closest to Him and the other from those who were threatened by Him.

**1. Friends and family thought he was deranged.** Look at Mark 3:20-21: ***“Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat.  And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, ‘He is out of his mind.’”*** We’ll come back to the family of Jesus in our text for next week. Don’t miss the obvious application that if you stand up for Jesus your own friends and family may turn on you.

**2. Religious police thought He was demonized.** While His family thought He was mad, the scribes thought He was bad. His brothers and sisters thought he was deranged while the religious crowd claimed he was demonized. Remember that Mark 3:6 says the Pharisees and the Herodians were plotting to destroy Jesus. And now the Scribes try to take him out.

News about Jesus had reached all the way to the capital city of Jerusalem, located about 90 miles away. Making the several day journey, the scribes, who served as the religious police, confront Christ by making a very evil accusation in verse 22: ***“And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul,’ and ‘by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.’”***

Notice they don’t deny that Jesus heals the diseased or that He casts out demons. Instead, they try to discount His power and to destroy His prestige. The New Living Translation renders it this way: *“He’s possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That’s where he gets the power to cast out demons.”*  Their insulting and vile attack is two-pronged and is designed to turn public opinion against Jesus.

1. **They say Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul.** The religious leaders often made this accusation as seen in John 8:48: ***“The Jews answered him, ‘Are we not right in saying you are a Samaritan and have a demon?’”*** But here they are not saying he has an ordinary demon but that Satan himself has taken possession of him. They use a very nasty name that comes from the ancient Canaanites, meaning the *“lord of the dung flies”* or the *“lord of filth.”*

Some of you are thinking of the words to the classic song by Queen called, “Bohemian Rhapsody.” I went back and listened to this rock opera from my high school years and was creeped out when I realized that I used to sing it loudly with the help of the 8-track in my dad’s truck. Here are the words: *“Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me, for me.”* The scribes were saying that Beelzebub was inside Jesus.

1. **They say Jesus casts out demons by the prince of demons.** The word ***“prince”*** refers to the chief demon and is another way of saying he bows to Beelzebub and serves Satan.

After laying the ultimate insult at the feet of Jesus, it’s time for Jesus to respond in verse 23: ***“And he called them to him and said to them in parables…”*** They had just declared that He was possessed by the devil and so we see that He does two things:

**1. He called** **them to Him.** This phrase was used of summoning an adversary into a court of law. I wonder if they were nervous when He asked them to come closer.

**2. He spoke in parables.** A parable is an analogy and literally means, *“to lay something alongside.”* A parable took something they understood in order to explain something they didn’t. One commentator refers to parables as, *“crisp, pungent thrusts”* that go into the soul of the listener.

Jesus’ answer is summed up briefly and powerfully in the form of an absurd question: ***“How can Satan cast out Satan?”*** Good teachers use rhetorical questions and Jesus used them all the time.

Jesus then uses the word ***“divided”*** three times in the next three verses to prove His point. This word means, *“to be disunited by discord; to be separated into parts.”*

1. **A divided kingdom cannot stand.** His listeners were probably thinking of how Israel and Judah split into two parts after the death of Solomon when Jesus said in verse 24: ***“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.”***
2. **A divided house cannot stand.** In verse 25 we’re reminded of the importance of a family not fracturing: ***“If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”***

I want to pause here and give God the glory for Edgewood being a unified church. Thank you for how each of you strive to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace as spelled out in Ephesians 4:3. And thank you for how you love and support your pastors. Now more than ever we need to be a church that stands united on gospel truth as our society heads south. Let’s continue to march forward on mission for His glory.

1. **A divided Satan cannot stand.** Jesus points out the absurdity of their evil argument in verse 26: ***“And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.”*** If Satan were to cast out demons it would defeat his own purpose. Satan would never act contrary to his own interests. He wants to destroy the work of God, not his own work.

In verse 27, Jesus goes in for the kill shot, literally: ***“But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.”***  *If you want to take the property of someone, you must overpower the owner.* Here Jesus is saying that Satan is the strong man but He is the stronger Savior.

Jesus binds Satan and then plunders his possessions. Kent Hughes believes these possessions, or ***“goods”*** are the helpless victims Satan holds in bondage through his demons. To ***“plunder”*** means to *“snatch, seize and carry away.”* That’s exactly what Jesus has been doing, and continues to do today as He saves people from the bondage of serving sin and Satan.

There is no way that the Lord of Lords is in league with the prince of darkness! Jesus has come to conquer the evil one and to destroy the works of the devil. 1 John 3:8 is quite clear: ***“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”*** Jesus is clearly stronger than Satan as evidenced by our passage last week when we saw that the demons ***“fell down before him”*** in verse 11.

Keeping in mind the context, let’s look now at the text found in verse 29: ***“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”***  To ***“blaspheme”*** means *“defiant irreverence.”*  At its most basic level it refers to speaking evil about the Holy Spirit. One Bible dictionary puts it like this: *“To speak reproachfully, to rail at, to revile.”* These are deeply disturbing words.

What then is the unforgivable sin? Beth and I received about 15 free books at the conference we attended this week. All we had to do was show our wristband. When I stopped by the table that was giving out free Bibles, the worker asked to see my wristband. I asked her if a lot of pastors had been stealing Bibles. She smiled and said, *“I’m not sure but that would be the ultimate sin, wouldn’t it?”*

So maybe stealing a Bible is the unforgivable sin? Is it taking God’s name in vain? Is it yelling at Him or murder or adultery or refusing to eat cheese curds (well, maybe)?

In short, the unforgivable sin is attributing the mighty miracle working power of Jesus to Satan. The scribes witnessed undeniable exorcisms and instead of giving glory to the Holy Spirit they claimed that He was possessed by Beelzebub. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is accusing Jesus of being demon possessed.

I like how Matt Chandler puts it: *“The blasphemy of the Spirit is the knowledgeable, willful and continued rebellion against the ministry of the Holy Spirit.”* Sam Storms adds, *“It is not a careless act but a calloused attitude…it is not mere denial, but determined denial; not mere rejection, but wanton, willful, wicked, wide-eyed rejection.”* It’s a deliberate refusal of the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 30 tells us why this person never has forgiveness and is guilty of an eternal sin: ***“for they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”*** The word ***“for”*** is like saying, *“because.”* And notice that they continued, or persisted in ***“saying.”*** This was not a one-time thing but rather an on going, fixed and settled attitude in their minds that came out of the mouths.

**Some Takeaways**

Here are some takeaways from our text.

**1. Always consider the context.** The unforgivable sin is ascribing to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit.

**2. Christians cannot commit this sin.** If you are truly saved, then you are truly secure.When you believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life, then you have eternal life. 1 John 5:11-12: ***“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”***

**3. If you worry that you’ve committed the unforgivable sin, you haven’t.** If you’re mourning and grieving and anxious about sin, it means that the Holy Spirit is active in your life.

**4. Satan wants to steal your hope and joy.** He wants you to think you’ve gone too far to be saved. He wants you to swim with shame and to be gutted by guilt.

**5. This is a warning to those persisting in unbelief.** Perhaps you’ve been languishing under true guilt. Conviction is a good thing if it leads you to commitment. You *are* a sinner and if you have not repented and received Jesus Christ, you will not be forgiven. The good news is that God is ready to forgive each and every one of your sins. Don’t put off a decision to follow Christ. One could say that the only unpardonable sin today is that of continued unbelief. If you die in a state of disbelief, your sins will not be forgiven and you will pay the price for them forever in a place of everlasting destruction called hell with the devil and all his demons!

One of the speakers at the conference made this stunning statement: *“Too much emphasis is put on sins and not enough on sin.”* I thought about that all week. Our problem is not the number of sins we’ve committed; our problem is our sin nature. Yes, we sin in multiple ways but it’s because we are sinners by nature. We are sinners who sin.

At the same time, we should be concerned about any sin that we knowingly commit and refuse to give up. Are you tormented by your sins like Tom is? As far as I know, he is still suffering. Actually, most of us aren’t unsettled enough about our sins. We excuse them, rationalize them or minimize them by comparing ourselves with others. But if you have not been saved, you should shudder at the thought of entering eternity with your sins not forgiven.

One pastor writes: *“Many Christians have such a sentimental view of God’s justice that they never feel the terror and horror at the thought of being utterly forsaken by God because of their persistence in sin…God is never neutral toward sin. He either forgives it or punishes it.”* Romans 2:5 – ***“But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”***

Let’s go back to the verse we skipped and unpack the freedom found in verse 28: ***“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter.”*** If verse 29 is the bad news, verse 28 is the good news. Most people rush past this part of the passage when discussing the unforgivable sin.

* **This is the truth.** When Jesus uses the word, ***“truly”*** or ***“verily,”*** He is stating that what He is about to say is absolutely authoritative and reliable. It’s like He’s saying, *“listen up!”*
* **This is authoritative.** Next He uses the pronoun ***“I say…”*** to show that He has no need to quote someone else. He’s saying, *“Listen up, I’m the Lord!”*
* **This must become personal.** And then He personalizes it by saying, ***“Truly, I say to you…”*** This message is for you right now.

Notice next that, ***“all sins will be forgiven”*** and ***“whatever blasphemies.”*** The words ***“all”*** and ***“whatever”*** in the Greek mean *“all”* and *“whatever.”*  The idea is that all manner or types of sin will be forgiven. All sinful behaviors and slanderous blasphemies against God can be blotted out! Listen to a verse from the Old Testament and a verse from the New:

* Isaiah 1:18: ***“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”***
* 1 John 1:7: ***“…and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”***

Through faith in Jesus Christ, you can be forgiven! Satan would like nothing more than to have you believe that your sins will never be forgiven. But if you know Jesus, your sins *are* forgiven.

But if you die in your sins, you will never be forgiven. There’s no second chance. No do over. No purgatory. Hebrews 2:3: ***“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”***

It’s dangerous to hear the gospel message and to decide to walk away. Don’t forfeit the forgiveness He wants to give you. Right here. Right now.

Have you ever repented of your sins? Have you turned from them in utter revulsion and turned to Christ? The gospel Jesus preached starts with repentance according to Mark 1:15: ***“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”***

Tax day this year has been extended until Monday. Some people are like the man who wrote the IRS stating: *“I can’t sleep; my conscience is bothering me. Enclosed find a check for $50.00. If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the rest!”*

Resist no longer. Repent fully and believe in the gospel. Jesus died as your sin substitute on the cross, His blood paying the price for all of your sins. His sacrifice satisfied the divine wrath of a holy and righteous God. Submit and surrender by the Holy Spirit of God to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Believe that He did all this for you, receive Him as your Savior and determine to follow Him as your Lord.

Don’t be like the buzzard that spotted a dead fish on a piece of floating ice in the river. He landed on the ice and began to eat. He knew it was dangerous because the falls were just ahead but he knew his wings were strong and he could fly away right before going over. So he kept eating. But just before the piece of ice tumbled over the falls he spread his wings to fly but because he waited too long, his feet were now frozen in the ice and there was no escape. In an instant he plunged to his destruction.

Fellow sinner, it’s time to be saved.

🡪 Gospel presentation

We’re going to end with a video that we’ve shown before. My prayer is that you will not leave here today without your sins forgiven and that you will know the joy of your salvation and the freedom that comes from forgiveness.

Here are some great words to ponder if you’re a Christ-follower: *“I’ve blown it, but I’m beautiful to God; I’m fatally flawed, but fully forgiven.”*

He makes us new!

**Closing Video: “Beautiful Things”**

Are you ready to be made new?

**Members: Tom and Linda Williams** (Saturday night)