

Hope Christian Church
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2 March 2014

Sermon Series: *The Gospel of Mark*



"Is There An Unforgivable Sin?"

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

Mark 3:20-30, (ESV)

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat.
²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

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." ²³ And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "*How can Satan cast out Satan?*" ²⁴ *If a kingdom is divided*

against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.²⁷ 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.

²⁸ "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter,²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—³⁰ for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Introduction

In 1961, A.W. Tozer wrote a book entitled, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. The first sentence of the book says, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹ The text before us this morning is an illustration of the same point only in relation to Jesus rather than God himself. "What comes into our minds when we think about Jesus is the most important thing about us." ***What we think about Jesus is a matter of life and death.*** Thinking rightly about him leads to eternal life. Thinking wrongly about him leads to eternal death.

Following the events of Jesus' life, looking at all that he taught and all that he did, will lead each person to some conclusion about who Jesus is. This is what we are doing as we read through the gospel of Mark. This coming week, if you want to read ahead, we will focus on chapters 6 through 8:29. Mark has recorded for us the events of Jesus' life so that we may rightly understand exactly who Jesus is. Along the way there may be some confusion, but in the end, may each of us be absolutely clear on exactly who he is.

Thus far in the Gospel of Mark, we have seen in Jesus someone who is amazingly patient with sinners. He is kind toward sinners in a way that no one else in his day was. He welcomes sinners and tax collectors and he even eats with them. But we ought not to think for one minute that Jesus was ambiguous about sin.

Yes, he welcomed sinners into his presence, but he never welcomed them to remain in their sin. Yes, he was tolerant of sinners, but he never encouraged sinners to be tolerant of their own sin. Jesus is the most forgiving person you will ever meet and each of us will meet him one day.

2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Is there a sin that the most forgiving person in all the world will not forgive? Is there an unforgivable sin? Is Jesus so loving and compassionate that he will forgive *all* sin? Or is he the

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961), p. 1.

kind of man who would sentence someone to eternal condemnation? If we are going to claim to know Jesus, then we'd better know him as he is and not as we, in our own minds, decide he ought to be.

What do you think about Jesus? Is he a good teacher of human morality? Or is the holy Son of God who will one day judge the living and the dead?

What Jesus' Family Thought About Him

Many people are not sure what to think about Jesus. As we look at the text this morning, we learn that even Jesus' own family was confused about him in the beginning.

Mark 3:20-22, (ESV)

²⁰ *Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat.*

²¹ *And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."*

At this point, Jesus is still living in Galilee, most likely with Peter's house being his base of operations, which was located in Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.



Jesus has been out in the surrounding areas preaching and teaching and he had also just made public his selection of 12 disciples, whom he named apostles (Mk 3:13-19). He has now returned to Capernaum and the word has gotten out that he is there and the crowds are again gathering around him so much so that **they could not even eat** (v.20).

As the crowds gathered and the news about Jesus spread, word made its way from Galilee all the way to Nazareth, which was about 30 miles. His **family heard** of all that was going on with Jesus and they went on a hike to rescue him. If we look down in v.31, Mark tells us that this meant "**his mother and his brothers.**"²

Mary and her four other sons (Mk 6:3) went to get Jesus because they thought **he was out of his mind**. They thought Jesus was crazy. They thought he was a lunatic. They thought Jesus was having mental problems and they were going to go and get him and take him back to Nazareth and hopefully, get him back to work in the carpentry shop while praying that all the controversy would blow over.

² Mark 6:3 names Jesus' four brothers, James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. Jesus also had at least two sisters. Since Joseph is not mentioned, he most likely died sometime before this.

They were prepared to take him by force. We know this because v.21 tells us “*they went out to **seize** him.*” The word ‘seize’ (κρατέω *krateo*) means ‘to exercise power or force over someone or something—to have power over, to control.’³ This same word is used in Mark seven times when referring to someone being arrested⁴ (see Mk 6:17; 12:12; 14:1, 44, 46, 49, 51).

At this point, not even his family was believing in him.⁵ They thought he was nuts. They had heard about all that he was doing and saying and they came to the conclusion that he was off the rails so they were going to lay hands on him and forcibly take him home, back to Nazareth. They had concluded that Jesus was mentally unstable. That was the explanation for Jesus’ behavior.

Jesus’ Insane Doings

Let’s be reminded of all that Jesus had been doing. They had heard about his amazing teaching and preaching. Jesus had been teaching in the synagogues and preaching in all the surrounding towns and the people’s response had been, “*We have never heard such authoritative teaching*” (Mk 1:22).

Jesus had repeatedly and publicly cast out demons and demonstrated total authority over them (Mk 1:23-27, 32-34). Jesus had been healing people everywhere he went, from private homes (Mk 1:29-31) to public gatherings (Mk 2:1-12). He had healed every kind of disease from paralysis, to leprosy, to fever, to atrophied limbs. Jesus had even been healing people on the Sabbath and intentionally challenging the Pharisees that their understanding of Sabbath regulations was wrong (Mk 3:1-6).

Jesus had publicly demonstrated authority in teaching, authority over disease, authority over demons, authority over acceptable Sabbath practices, and finally he had even claimed authority to forgive people of their sins (Mk 2:5-11). His family looked at all this evidence and they thought, “He’s nuts.” So they make the journey to Galilee to grab him and take him home.

What the Pharisees Thought About Jesus

There were also some others who were making their own journey to Galilee. The Pharisees had also heard all the same news about Jesus and they had done some of their own thinking about Jesus. They sent some of their scribes down to Galilee from Jerusalem, about 65 miles (a 3 to 4 day journey), with their own conclusions about Jesus. Now Mark lets us in on exactly what the Pharisees were thinking about Jesus.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 473.

⁴ Walter W. Wessel, “Mark,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 644.

⁵ See also John 7:5.

Mark 3:22 (ESV)

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."*

These scribes arrived with the official verdict from Jerusalem on this new rabbi—they conclude that he's possessed. His family thought he was nuts, but the Jerusalem religious elite concluded that he was possessed by Satan. It would have been utterly absurd to deny Jesus' power, for there were hundreds of people whose lives had been forever changed by him, so they opted for a more sinister explanation of his power—he got it from the prince of demons.

"Yes he has power all right," they went around saying, "but he gets it from Beelzebul. Yes, indeed he does cast out demons, but he has this power by the prince of demons! It is a ploy to deceive you. It looks like he is casting out demons, but actually they are in league together. *Jesus and Satan are on the same team.*"

This charge is significant. They are calling Jesus a sorcerer. They are saying he is dealing in black magic. They're calling him a male witch. Jesus addresses it head on.

Mark 3:23 (ESV)

²³ *And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "**How can Satan cast out Satan?**"*

Evidently these scribes were lurking around in the back of the crowds spreading this lie among the people. They were not confronting Jesus directly. So he called them to him. He said, "Hey guys. Come over here to me. Let's talk about this."

You'll note that the term Beelzebul is synonymous with Satan. The term came from the name of a Canaanite god, Beelzebub, god of Ekron⁶ (1 Kg 1:2) and meant 'lord of the temple' or 'lord of the high place.' The change in spelling, from Beelzebub to Beelzebul, reflects later Hebrew desecration of the name of the god, which means 'lord of the dung,' or 'lord of the flies.'⁷ By the time of Jesus' day, the term was synonymous with Satan.

The prince of demons is Satan. So Jesus asks, "**How can Satan cast out Satan?**" Clearly Jesus acknowledges that Satan is real. He does not say, "You guys have it all wrong. There's no such being called Satan. He's a fictional character made up by the mean, nasty preachers to scare little kids." He says nothing at all like that, because Jesus knows that Satan is real. In fact, Jesus indicates that Satan has somewhat of a kingdom.

⁶ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Mk 3:22.

⁷ John D. Grassmick, "Mark," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 117.

Mark 3:24-26 (ESV)

²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

Jesus is demonstrating the utter incongruity of their devious, deceitful reasoning. His family thinks he is crazy, but he very lucidly reveals the insanity of the kind of thinking that would reason that Jesus is possessed by Satan and using Satan's power to destroy Satan's kingdom. Jesus clearly argues that if their thinking is true, then Satan is destroying his own kingdom. Jesus is not crazy. The people who are crazy are the ones who truly believe the argument they are putting forth.

Matthew, in his gospel, records this same event. He notes that Jesus also said,

Matthew 12:27 (ESV)

²⁷ "If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?"

Jesus has made it clear that he is not in league with Satan. Jesus now moves on to a more likely explanation.

Mark 3:27 (ESV)

²⁷ 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.

The most reasonable explanation for Jesus' power and authority is that he is stronger than Satan and has overcome him. The reason Jesus is able to cast demons out of people is because compared to Jesus, Satan is like a bound strong man. The people who had once been the 'property' of Satan have now been set free from Satan. Jesus is 'plundering' Satan's kingdom and Satan is powerless to stop him.

So concluding that Jesus' power and authority come from Satan himself, is a very bad conclusion. To conclude that Satan's kingdom is at work through Jesus is to make a very grave mistake about the kind of kingdom that is at work and by whose power it is that Jesus is casting out demons. Again, Matthew records a helpful sentence that Mark does not.

Matthew 12:28 (ESV)

²⁸ "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."

This, of course, is the only appropriate conclusion. The kingdom of Satan is not casting out the kingdom of Satan. The kingdom of God is casting out the kingdom of Satan. Jesus is not possessed by Satan. He is possessed by the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus is not an emissary of the devil. He is God's only Son whom he has chosen to uniquely anoint with his own Holy Spirit in

such a way that both disease and demons obey his every command. The right way to think about Jesus is that he is chosen by God and he has brought with him the power and authority of the kingdom of God.

Think Carefully

Jesus now issues one of the most amazing statements in all of Scripture and one of the most breathtaking warnings ever spoken. Still speaking to these scribes whom he has called to him, no doubt looking them straight in the eyes and speaking with the same kind of authority that stunned the crowds back in the synagogue, he warns them with piercing clarity.

Mark 3:28-30 (ESV)

²⁸ "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"³⁰ for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

These words are the words of Jesus and they are staggeringly sober. Contained within is an amazing promise that *"all sins will be forgiven the children of men"* along with *"whatever blasphemies they utter."* That is an amazingly broad promise. However, there is one sinful blasphemy which places one beyond the broad scope of God's gracious forgiveness. Jesus warns that there is a sin so heinous that once committed, one "never has forgiveness" thus leaving one in an eternal state of guilt. Jesus calls this unpardonable sin "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit."

The *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines blasphemy as, "to speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation—to revile or to defame"⁸ a person's character; "to speak of or address with irreverence;"⁹ "to slander, to speak lightly or profanely of sacred things."¹⁰ The Old Testament reveals that speaking in such a way about God was punishable by death.¹¹ The word 'blaspheme' appears in the Bible 29 times and in all but four instances the word explicitly refers to slanderous spoken words.¹²

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit therefore relates to speaking against his holy character or his name in an irreverent, profane, contemptuous, and insulting manner. This understanding is borne out by further examination of the passage at hand.

⁸ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 433.

⁹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

¹⁰ Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* : Updated Edition (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

¹¹ Lev 24:11.

¹² Lev 24:11, 16; 1 Sam 3:13; Ez 20:27; Mt 9:3; Mk 3:29; Lk 12:10; 22:65; Jn 10:36; Acts 6:11; 19:37; 26:11; Rom 2:24; 1 Tim 1:13, 20; Jam 2:7; 2 Ptr 2:2, 10-12, Jude 8-10; Rev 13:1, 5-6; 17:3.

It is clear from Mark 3:28 that the particular sin Jesus has in mind was a sin that was spoken, for Jesus says, *"whatever blasphemies they utter."* That which is "uttered" is that which is spoken. Furthermore, in verse 30, Mark explains the context which required Jesus to address this particular sin, *"for they¹³ were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" Again, we see the unpardonable sin is manifested in speech. In the parallel account of this event in Matthew's gospel, the point is made even clearer. Matthew indicates that Jesus said, "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Mt 12:32). Clearly the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a sin that is spoken.*

This does not mean that the unpardonable sin is merely limited to the physical mechanics of speech as though speaking certain words in a certain order would heap upon one the condemnation of eternal guilt. In Matthew's account of this instance Jesus makes this clear as he goes on to say, *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."¹⁴ The significance of this kind of blasphemy is not merely the wickedness of the words that are spoken, but the fact that what is spoken flows out of a deeply settled internal conviction of the heart.*

Continual Willful Resistance

For example, Mark notes that the Pharisees *"were saying that Jesus had an unclean spirit"* (Mk 3:30). The verb 'were saying' is in the imperfect tense which indicates that they were habitually saying and teaching the people that Jesus was possessed by a demon. This was not a one-off slip of the tongue. It was a persistent teaching and it was one that willfully evil in the face of clear evidence to the contrary. Concluding that Jesus was a servant of Satan, despite the wonderfully good works he had done, could only have resulted from a willful, hard-hearted rejection of the clear work of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus heard these Pharisees saying that he was an agent of Satan, even after they had heard him teach, watched him heal the sick and the blind, and cast out demons, Jesus warned them that they were standing on the brink of committing a sin from which they would never be forgiven. They had seen enough to reach the right conclusion about Jesus. Unlike the apostle Paul, who describes himself as a "former blasphemer," who was forgiven of his blasphemies because he had acted in ignorance.¹⁵ Paul blasphemed in ignorance and so he was forgiven. But the one who rejects the clear work of the Holy Spirit and blasphemes will not be forgiven. This means that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit results from an unusually hard heart which flows from continual, willful resistance to the clear working of the Holy Spirit.

¹³ "They," in this verse, refers to the scribes and the Pharisees. Mark reports that they were "scribes who came down from Jerusalem" (Mk 3:22) and Matthew notes there some of them were Pharisees (Mt 12:24).

¹⁴ Matthew 12:34.

¹⁵ 1 Timothy 1:13.

Jesus explained in Mark 3:28-29¹⁶ that *“all sins of mankind and whatever blasphemies they utter would be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would never be forgiven.”* Jesus does not say, “all blasphemies will be forgiven **except** the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” What Jesus means is that the one who blasphemes the Holy Spirit, after having witnessed such evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit as had the Pharisees and yet willfully continues to reject him, has become so hard-hearted that repentance is rendered impossible. Forgiveness of sins is not automatic. Forgiveness is predicated upon repentance.¹⁷ However, the one who blasphemes the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness because his heart is rendered so hard that it is impossible to repent—ever.

The reason blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable is because the heart is the realm in which the Holy Spirit works. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of the gospel (Jn 14:17), to open the heart to receive the gospel (Acts 16:14), to grant wisdom to “enlighten the eyes of the heart” (Eph 1:17-18), to remove the veil that clouds the mind and illumines the mind to the see the glory of the gospel (2 Cor 3:14-16), to enable one to clearly see one’s sins (Jn 16:8), and to guide one into all truth (Jn 16:13). Furthermore, it is the work of the Holy Spirit to glorify Jesus (Jn 16:14).

When a person continually resists the work of the Holy Spirit in each of these arenas and has seen the power of God demonstrated (as the Pharisees had through the miracles of Jesus) and the goodness of the manifest work of God and then willfully rejects that work, refuses God’s grace, denies his power, and then goes on to speak about ultimate goodness so as to equate it with ultimate evil, then that person runs the risk of so offending the Holy Spirit that he will forever withdraw from that person leaving them in such a hard-hearted condition that any future repentance of sins is impossible.¹⁸

More than Persistent Unbelief

The unpardonable sin is not merely persisting in a state of unbelief until death. We know this because Jesus said that the person who commits this sin will “not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”¹⁹ If the unpardonable sin was simply persisting in a state of unbelief until death, then Jesus’ words that the unpardonable sin “would not be forgiven in this age” are meaningless. If it is only at the end of life that this sin will not be forgiven, then why did Jesus say that this particular sin would not be forgiven “in this age?” The unpardonable sin, therefore, is a sin that can be committed “in this age,” while one is living, that is so offensive to the Holy Spirit that one is placed beyond all possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

¹⁶ See parallel account in Matthew 12:31-32.

¹⁷ Mark 1:4, 14.

¹⁸ See Hebrews 6:4-6.

¹⁹ Matthew 12:32.

Definition of the Unpardonable Sin

We may therefore define the unpardonable sin as slanderous, contemptuous, irreverent, and profane speech about God, flowing from the settled conviction of a hardened heart that knowingly and willfully has chosen to reject God after having witnessed the life-changing powerful work of the Holy Spirit, which so offends the Holy Spirit that he permanently withdraws leaving one in a guilty, hardened condition that is beyond all possibility of future repentance and forgiveness.

The person who is grieved that they may have committed this sin somewhere in the past, is mostly likely not guilty of this sin, since the hardness of heart that would necessarily result from this action would not allow such a tender hearted response. The person guilty of committing the unpardonable sin would be so hard-hearted that he would not care that he had committed this sin. In contemplating this sin, if there is a particular instance that is brought to mind for which you desire to repent, then the fact that you desire to repent of it would certainly indicate that you have not committed the unpardonable sin, since repentance is impossible for the one who has committed this sin. No Christian should ever worry that he or she has committed this sin since the Holy Spirit would never allow one of his own, "whom he has sealed unto the day of redemption,"²⁰ to commit a sin for which he would be eternally condemned, since for those who are in Christ Jesus, all condemnation has been taken away.²¹

²⁰ Eph 1:13; 4:30.

²¹ Rom 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation for this who are in Christ Jesus."