

Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven

The Unforgiveable Sin * Matthew 12:22-32

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Matthew 12. I hope you are ready to go this morning because our passage today is absolutely fascinating and there are some incredible things to learn from it. What's more, this passage is very significant. I say this because a) Matthew is normally concise but here he goes into great detail, and b) lot's of people struggle with the issue that he is addressing. You may have noted that the title of the message today is "The Unforgivable Sin", a topic that causes much confusion and I believe unnecessary angst. It's very possible that many of us here today have, at one point, worried whether or not we have committed the unforgiveable sin. If so, this message is especially for you. So, with that as an introduction, follow along with me as I read Matthew 12:22-32:

*Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. **23** And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" **24** But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." **25** Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. **26** And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? **27** And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. **28** But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. **29** Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. **30** Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. **31** Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. **32** And 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. (Matthew 12:22-32, ESV)*

Now, you may have noticed that this text is somewhat complicated, and because of that I want to state the main point right from the get go. Are you ready? The main point of this passage is that the unforgiveable sin is to deny the Holy Spirit's revelation of who Jesus is. Let me state that again. The main point of this passage is that the unforgiveable sin is to deny the Holy Spirit's revelation of who Jesus is. And I am going to take the next forty minutes or so to show you how this is the case.

To do so I need to start by reminding you that we have entered a section of Matthew where we begin to see how opposition to Jesus is mounting. Through the first 11 chapters of this gospel everything goes pretty well for Jesus. For the most part people are on board and pretty much agreeing that He is the man. However, when we hit chapter 12 we see that His popularity is quickly beginning to fade, especially with the religious leaders known as the Pharisees. And while in last week's passage we saw that they were simply questioning, today we will note that they have become openly hostile.

Our passage today begins with Jesus healing a man that was blind and mute. Now, Matthew's focus here is on the response of the people to the miracle, so he doesn't share a whole lot of details about the miracle itself. However, it's important for us to note two things. First, it's apparent that a demon was the cause of the man's ailments, and Jesus healed him by casting out the demon. This is not to say that every human ailment is caused by demons. I had a nasty cold this week but I am pretty sure it wasn't because I am demon-possessed. At least I hope not. We also know that Jesus healed many people who were not demon-possessed. However, that was the case in this instance.

Second, Jesus cast out the demon with a word. While Matthew doesn't state this specifically, that is how Jesus does it in other instances in the gospels, and so we can assume that He does the same thing here. Jesus tells the demon to come out, and it immediately obeys and the man is suddenly able to both see and speak. The reason this is significant is that while exorcisms were not unheard of in 1st century Israel, they were never

performed as Jesus performed them. They always involved some form of incantations or special rituals, as if the exact right procedures had to be followed in order for them to work. Think Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings. But this was not the case with Jesus. He spoke a single word, and the demons were gone. This let's the people know that something special is going on with Jesus.

Two Responses

1. The crowd asks who Jesus is.

Now, as I said earlier, Matthew's focus in this passage is on the response of those who witnessed the event. And I want you to note with me that he records two responses. First, the crowd asks who Jesus is. Look at verse 23:

And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"

In other words they are wondering, "Can this be the long awaited Messiah?" The structure of this verse in the Greek tells us that this was not a cynical question. The people were beginning to suspect that maybe Jesus was actually the one who would fulfill the Old Testament Messianic prophecies, that He really was the one sent by God to rescue His people. This surprises them because Jesus is not exactly the Messiah they were looking for, but His miracles are certainly making them wonder.

2. The Pharisees accuse Jesus of working by the power of Satan.

However, the Pharisees have a much different response. Note what they say in verse 24:

But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

Beelzebul is another name for Satan, which means that the Pharisees are claiming that instead of performing miracles by the power of God, Jesus is doing so through the power of Satan.

Now, in just a minute we are going to look at how Jesus responds to this charge, but before we do we need to grasp just how serious it is. This really is a defining moment in the gospel of Matthew, and to be honest with you, in all of history. Here in chapter 12 we can see the Pharisees deciding to go down a path that would eventually lead to Jesus' crucifixion. In fact verse 14 tells us that they were trying to figure out how to murder Him. Therefore, this is the turning point, so to speak, in the gospel of Matthew. And so make no mistake. How we respond to the question of who Jesus is makes all the difference in the world. Jesus is going to tell us later on in this passage that when it comes to Him, there is no neutrality. We are either for Him or against Him. When it comes to Jesus, we can't be Switzerland. We either believe He is from God or we believe He is from the devil. It's one or the other. And right here the Pharisees make their choice, a choice that has impacted all of history. So get this, your decision on Jesus is the defining decision of your life. That was the case for the Pharisees, and that is the case for you and me.

So, let's get back to the text and see how Jesus answers the Pharisees accusation that He is working through the power of Satan. And here is what we will see; in verses 25-29 He responds that their charge is one, absurd, two, hypocritical, and three, contrary to the evidence. Let's take a few moments to look at all three.

Jesus' Response to the Pharisees Accusation

1. Their charge is absurd.

First, in verses 25-26 Jesus says their charge is absurd.

*Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. **26** And if*

Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?"

In other words, Jesus says, "why would Satan work against himself?" You have probably heard the phrase, "united we stand, divided we fall" and that is just as true for Satan and his demons as it is for human institutions and relationships.

Don't miss this – the Bible tells us that Satan is the god of this world. He is the one who rules this earth. And he exerts his control by sending out his demons to wreak havoc in the hearts and lives of men and women. Why then would he work against himself to cast out demons that were doing exactly what he sent them to do? The Pharisees' charge just doesn't make sense.

2. Their charge is hypocritical.

Second, in verse 27 Jesus says their charge is hypocritical.

And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

The sons here are the followers of the Pharisees, who were apparently known to cast out demons themselves. And so Jesus is saying it is hypocritical for them to accuse Him of working by the power of Satan when their followers were doing, or at least were claiming to do, the exact same thing.

This actually shows that at the heart of the Pharisees' accusation is envy. Note that they don't deny that Jesus was casting out demons. They couldn't deny it, because they witnessed it themselves. However, they did become angry that the people were beginning to think that Jesus actually might be the Messiah, which led them to make outrageous and unfounded claims about who He was, claims that in the pure light of day, made them look

very foolish. But of course, that's what envy does. It keeps us from thinking straight and eventually leads us to do very stupid things.

Have you ever been envious of someone? Did you find that it affected your opinion of them? Well, that's exactly what is happening to the Pharisees'. They are envious of Jesus and their envy is quickly turning into unbridled hatred.

3. Their charge is contrary to the evidence.

Finally, and most significantly, in verses 28-29 Jesus says that the Pharisees' charge is contrary to the evidence.

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Now, these are some complex verses so let me explain a few things that will help you understand what Jesus is getting at. And by the way, this stuff is great, so listen up. The strong man in verse 29 is Satan, and his house is the sinful world over which he exerts control. In fact, the name Beelzebul means *master of the house*. Satan is the master of this world. This earth is his "kingdom". Numerous times in the New Testament he is called the ruler or god of this world. This world is his house, his kingdom.

However, when Jesus comes in the power of the Spirit of God and begins to preach, perform miracles and cast out demons, He shows that the kingdom of God has come to earth and is in the process of taking over. And I tell you; you have to love verse 29. Do you know whom it is that has come and bound Satan so He can plunder his house? It's Jesus! Now we don't normally think of Jesus as a thief, but that is what He is calling Himself here. He is saying that He has come and bound Satan so He can steal whatever He wants from his house.

Now, it's important for us to understand what Jesus wants. We need to understand what He came to steal from Satan. Do you know what it is? Do you know what plunder that Jesus is after? He is after people. He is after you and me. Note what Paul tells us in Colossians 1:

*[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, **14** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14, ESV)*

Jesus has come and transferred us from Satan's kingdom into the kingdom of God. Are you thankful for that today?

And so what we see Jesus telling the Pharisees here is that the evidence of people being rescued from Satan clearly shows that He is not working with Satan but rather against him, which must mean that He truly is the Son of God, the long awaited Messiah. In other words the answer to the people's question of "is this the Son of David?" is an unqualified yes, and it is proved by His power over Satan.

Application

Now, at this point in the message I normally make a few application points from the text, but today I don't have to because Jesus makes the application for me in verses 30-32. I love it when Jesus does that, it's so very helpful. Note with me two application points from this passage today.

1. There is no neutrality where Jesus is concerned.

Number one, there is no neutrality where Jesus is concerned. Look at verse 30:

Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Here in this verse Jesus paints it in black and white. You are either for Him or against Him. There is no in between. He is either the devil or He is the very God Himself. There are no other options. He isn't simply a good man with some notable teachings. What this book contains about Him aren't just some nice stories to be enjoyed. He is either who He says He is – the Son of God – or He is a deranged lunatic empowered by the devil. To put it in terms that C.S. Lewis used, He is either a liar, a lunatic or He is Lord. There are no other options.

And I want to go a little further on this point with a group that, for the most part, would claim to be Jesus followers. Note what the second part of verse 30 says:

Whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Now, it's easy to overlook this, and we probably would prefer to, but we've got to go there. This statement means that we are either part of Jesus' mission to rescue lost and broken people, or we are part of Satan's mission to do just the opposite. Jesus gathers and Satan scatters. And we are on one side or the other. And this is a hard word, but I think that in the context of Matthew's gospel it means that we are either on Jesus' team and making disciples or we are on Satan's team and preventing that from happening.

I point this out because I know, both from personal and pastoral experience that we like to think that sharing our faith and making disciples is optional in the Christian life. However, I truly believe Jesus is telling us here that it is not. He's telling us that we can't claim to be on His team and not be involved in the primary focus of that team, and that is rescuing lost and broken people. Think of it this way. It would be like telling Kirk Ferentz that you want to be on the Iowa Hawkeyes football team but you don't want to practice or play in the games on Saturday. It would be like telling him that you want to wear the uniform and have your name listed in the program, but you don't really want to get on the field and do your part to help the team win. If you told Coach Ferentz this I am pretty sure he would tell you,

“Well then you can’t be on the team.” Maybe in less congenial terms, but that is, in essence, what he would say.

Do you remember the key verse so far in our study of Matthew? The verse that I believe is the center of everything we have seen in the first 12 chapters and everything we will see in the next 16? It’s Matthew 4:19. Jesus says to His first disciples: *Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.* You see it’s not an option to follow Jesus and not make disciples. If we are with Him we will gather. If not, we are scattering. And so I want to urge you today to consider what team you are on. As we set out on a new year, perhaps it’s time to recommit ourselves to the core principle of what it means to follow Jesus – and that is making disciples.

2. The unforgiveable sin is to deny the Holy Spirit’s revelation of who Jesus is.

Ok, the second application point brings us all the way back to the main point of the passage. Everything so far has been building up to this. Do you remember what I told you at the beginning of the message?

The main point of this passage is that the unforgiveable sin is to deny the Holy Spirit’s revelation of who Jesus is. Let’s look at verses 31-32:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And 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.

Jesus tells us in verse 31 that the unforgiveable sin is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit and then clarifies this in verse 32 by saying that to blaspheme means to speak against Him. That’s what it means to blaspheme, to speak against someone. And to speak against the Holy Spirit is the one and only unforgiveable sin.

Now, kind of a side note here, but a really encouraging one. Every other sin can be forgiven. Isn't that wonderful – lying, stealing, gossiping, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, we probably should add gluttony after the holidays – all of these sins can be forgiven. Do you know what this means – it means that unless you blaspheme the Holy Spirit – I will talk more about what this is in a minute – you can be forgiven. As a reminder, when God forgives our sin He removes it from us as far as the east is from the west and remembers it no more. Here's another great application for some of us heading into a new year. It's time to take the sin that God has forgiven and forgotten and to move on and forget it ourselves. It's time to quit allowing it to hold us back and keep us from experiencing the joy that Jesus died for us to experience. It's time to let it go and in the words of the Apostle Paul *to forget what is behind and press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.*¹

That said, we need to talk a little more about what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit. It's obviously a very serious sin and you might be concerned that at some point you have committed it. In response, let me first say that if you are worried that you have done it, it's very likely you have not. Some of you who are very nervous right now need to take a deep breath and calm down a little. Those who have truly blasphemed don't really care if they have done it or not.

Nevertheless, in order to understand what it means, we have to remember whom Jesus is speaking to here. He is talking to the Pharisees who had essentially just called Him the devil. He is speaking to people who had heard His teaching and had seen the miracles He had performed, and yet refused to believe who He truly was. A key to understanding what blaspheming the Holy Spirit is comes from verse 28 where Jesus says that it is through the Spirit of God that He cast out demons. Taking this in context with verses 31-32 means that to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to deny His revealed truth of who Jesus is. You see, the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals to us who Jesus is, and to hear and see what the Holy Spirit says and

¹ Philippians 3:14, NIV

yet not to believe it is the one and only sin that is ultimately unforgivable. Ultimately to blaspheme the Holy Spirit means to call Him a liar.

So, I hope that on one hand this is incredibly encouraging. You do not need to worry that some flippant or foolish remark about God or Jesus has damned you to hell. You do not need to worry that you have committed a sin so heinous that God will not forgive you. You do not need to worry that your life has been such a mess that you are beyond saving. You do not need to fear that the devil's grip is so great that you can never be free. If the Holy Spirit has revealed to you that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and you have responded in repentance and faith, then you are forgiven and nothing, absolutely nothing, can take your salvation away.

On the other hand let me warn you that to not respond to the Spirit's revelation is a very serious matter. In fact it is the most serious matter. The only sin that ultimately sends us to hell is a failure to believe the Holy Spirit's revelation of who Jesus is. Every other sin but this one can be forgiven. And so I want to urge you to hear and see what the Holy Spirit is saying today about Jesus, and in response to turn to God in repentance and faith.

Now, let me say a final word that I think at least a few of us might need to hear today. I am sure there are some of us who struggle with worrying that we might one day blaspheme the Holy Spirit and commit the unforgiveable sin. Let me say confidently that if you are a true believer this is completely impossible. And I say this not because of anything in you, but because of the promise God has made to save to the uttermost those who place their faith in His Son. To put it another way, here is what the Apostle Paul told the church at Philippi:

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6, ESV)

If you have truly believed in Jesus, the Holy Spirit will keep you believing for all eternity. In other words, the Holy Spirit will keep you from blaspheming Himself. At the end of the day friends, it's not about us, it's all about Him.

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