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The Gospel According to Matthew

More Thoughts on The Unpardonable Sin

December 30, 2018

Sermon Text: Matthew 12:22-32

Scripture Reading: 1 Thes 4

In the years before the first world war, Ireland and Great Britain were torn with growing controversy. The main issue was something called “home rule.” Ireland was part of the British empire and was itself divided sharply between North and South, Protestant and Catholic. Home rule was a movement to establish a self-governing Ireland within Great Britain and many hot and heated sessions were held in the House of Commons over this very subject. Winston Churchill found himself right in the middle of it. He writes:

“The Cabinet on Friday afternoon sat long revolving the Irish problem. The Buckingham Palace Conference had broken down. The disagreements and antagonism seemed as fierce and as hopeless as ever, yet the margin in dispute, upon which such fateful issues hung, was *inconceivably petty*. The discussion turned principally upon the boundaries of Fermanagh and Tyrone (counties). To this pass had the Irish factions in their insensate warfare been able to drive their respective British champions. Upon the disposition of these clusters of humble parishes (counties) turned at the moment the political future of Great Britain. The North would not agree to this, and the South would not agree to that...Neither seemed able to give an inch.

The discussion had reached its inconclusive end, and the Cabinet was about to separate, when the quiet grave tones of Sir Edward Grey’s voice were heard reading a document which had just been brought to him from the

Foreign Office. It was the Austrian note to Serbia (after the assassination of the Archduke in Sarejevo). He had been reading or speaking for several minutes before I could disengage my mind from the tedious and bewildering debate which had just closed. We were all very tired, but gradually as the phrases and sentences followed one another, impressions of a wholly different character began to form in my mind.

The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe. I always take the greatest interest in reading accounts of how the war came upon different people; where they were, and what they were doing, when the first impression broke on their mind, and they first began to feel this overwhelming event laying its finger on their broken lives.” [The World in Crisis, Vol 1, Winston S. Churchill]

The horror of the first world war was about to break upon them all, and the issues that men were ready to rebel and die for suddenly faded into the shadows. What were they in comparison to the world crisis that would engulf the globe and see the slaughter of millions and millions of Englishmen, Irishmen, Germans,

Frenchmen, Belgians, Austrians, Bulgarians, Italians, and ultimately Americans?

This kind of sudden breaking into our lives is going to happen again one day. People will be, as Jesus said, marrying and giving in marriage, going about their daily routines, arguing and debating about things which seem so vital and important to them, buying and selling, eating and drinking, and in a moment, in the flash of an eye, everything will change. All these things are going to pass into meaninglessness. Christ is coming. And when He does, nothing will matter except – whether you know Him and whether He knows you, or not.

Those of us who were alive the day that President Kennedy was assassinated have had just a bit of a taste of this thing that Churchill experienced when the war broke out. I remember being in my junior high classroom in southern Oregon and suddenly the door flew open and the custodian told our teacher to turn on the radio, “Kennedy has been shot in Dallas.” Everything else came to a halt. The lesson. School. We all just sat there listening to Walter Cronkite. The rest of the day was like that. All the other little intrigues that typically consumed us meant nothing. Even the school bus was quiet on the way home.

What are the things that are consuming you? The things that you give your thoughts to? The things you *want*? That car. That girl or that young man? Issues at your workplace? The things you want to buy? Whether certain people like you or not? That injustice that you perceive yourself to be victimized by? Your politics? What is it that fills your thoughts and desires?

“The parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe.”

This is why John tells us:

1Jn 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (16) For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world. (17) And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

It is for the love of this present world that many people have committed what our Lord calls the unforgiveable sin. We talked about this sin last time and we need to give it further consideration this morning. *There is a sin that is*

unforgiveable. A sin which once committed seals the eternal fate of those who embrace it, though they weep and wail like Esau after he despised Christ for a bowl of mush.

Mat 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.

Let me comment on just a couple of verses and then we will focus on our main subject, the unpardonable sin. Look again at verse 27-

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

Jesus is showing the Pharisees how their accusation against him has no logical basis at all. Satan does not cast out Satan – and yet they accuse Jesus of healing this demon-oppressed man by Satanic power. And then He makes this point about “their sons.” What does He mean?

There were other Jews who claimed to be able to cast out demons. These people were sons or disciples of the Pharisees and the Pharisees approved of them. Now, Jesus comes along and

does the same thing (although no doubt in much more remarkable and evident power) and suddenly the Pharisees reject what is happening, saying it is not of God but of the devil. They want their cake and to eat it too, as we say. Jesus is showing them that it is one or the other. Either call the tree good or call it evil. You can't change your judgment because of your own prejudices toward someone. Their charge that Jesus cast out demons by the power of Satan simply reveals that they hated Christ no matter what evident power of God was working in Him.

And then Jesus drives it home:

(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.

Christ bound the strong man. That is, He was able to defeat Satan and deliver people whom Satan possessed – “plunder his goods” as He puts it. And the only true conclusion that could be arrived at then is *the kingdom of God has come upon you*. This is what all His miracles proved. The Messiah was to be empowered by, anointed by, the Spirit of God. Here

He is. The King. And they hated Him. No matter the evidence. No matter what they had seen and heard and felt and tasted of the Spirit of God working. They would not have it. And this is why Jesus warned them of the unpardonable sin which they had either committed already or were on the very brink of:

(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.

This sin is precisely what Jesus will again warn them against later in this same chapter:

Mat 12:43-45 "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. (44) Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. (45) Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be

with this evil generation."

It is what J.C. Ryle describes as being satisfied with a partial religious transformation:

"Saddest of all we have in this picture the history of many an individual's soul. There are men who seemed at one time of their lives to be under the influence of strong religious feelings. They reformed their ways. They laid aside many things that are bad. They took up many things that are good. But they stopped there, and went no further, and by and bye gave up religion altogether. The evil spirit returned to their hearts, and found them empty, swept, and garnished. They are now worse than they ever were before. Their consciences seem seared. Their sense of religious things appears entirely destroyed....*None prove so hopelessly wicked as those who, after experiencing strong religious convictions, have gone back again to sin and the world.*"

And hear Ryle once more:

"Difficult as these words undoubtedly are, they seem fairly to prove that there are degrees of sin. Offences arising from ignorance of the true mission of the Son of Man, will not be punished so heavily as offenses committed against the noontide light of the Holy

Ghost. The brighter the light, the greater the guilt of him who rejects it. The clearer a man's knowledge of the nature of the gospel, the greater his sin if he willfully refuses to repent and believe.

And he continues:

“This is a doctrine of which we find mournful proofs in every quarter. The unconverted children of godly parents, the unconverted servants of godly families, and the unconverted members of evangelical congregations *are the hardest people on earth to impress*. They seem past feeling....In each of these cases there was a combination of clear knowledge and deliberate rejection of Christ. In each there was light in the head, but hatred of truth in the heart. And the end of each seems to have been blackness and darkness forever.

May God give us a will to use our knowledge, whether it be little or great! May we beware of neglecting our opportunities, and leaving our privileges unimproved! Have we light? Then let us live fully up to our light. Do we know truth? Then let us walk in the truth. This is the best safeguard against the unpardonable sin.”

Let me end with two real examples of people I have encountered who either

had already committed the unpardonable sin or were on the very precipice of it. The first example I described part of last week but it warrants repeating.

I once knew a young man who we will call Jack. Jack and his family came to church here many years ago and from the very first Sunday I met him, Jack was thoroughly, it seemed, pumped about the Lord, about hearing His Word, and about plugging into this church. Over the few years he was here he made what appeared to be real progress in Christian growth and he served in the church.

And then, the time came when we noticed that Jack was not being faithful in his attendance on the Lord's day, even though he held an office which should have motivated him to set a good example to others. He said nothing to us about any problems or complaints. Jack just faded. And faded and faded, until one day he emailed me and said he and his family would not be coming to church anymore and no one from the church was to contact them ever again.

Well, the years went by. I missed that fellow and his family, but never heard from them again until last year when I saw him at the courthouse. I talked with him and learned that his children, now grown and married, were

attending church regularly, but he made no mention of any church he was part of. And that of course was because he had ceased following Christ long ago. I reminded him of some of the good times we had had, but he showed no indication of a similar feeling. I asked him, “why did you leave off fellowship with us?” He made no real answer except to generally say, “I guess it was the legalism,” and shortly he said, well, I have to go now.

And I realized as he walked away that although I was sad and missed him, he was not sad at all. What he called “legalism” was actually the duties of following and obeying Christ, and he had decided long ago he would rather stay in bed, watch TV, and generally indulge his own pleasures. *It was as if the old person I once knew was gone forever, and in a sense, he was.*

Paul spoke of these kind of people:

Php 3:17-19 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. (18) For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. (19) Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

See it? They experience the truth of Christ. They know the gospel is true. They even become what you might call halfway Christians. But in the end they seal their fate by deciding that the desires of their own sinful flesh are the god they desire to serve. So they do.

Here is another example that I think is very, very clear. I have told it to some of you before.

I was on a plane once flying to the east coast and a young lady about 23 or so was sitting next to me. At some point – maybe because of something she was reading, I learned that she was a medical student in Mexico City. I told her that I liked the Mexican people but that when I was a police officer in the early 1980’s I saw more and more illegal aliens causing problems in the Portland area. For example, I told her, they drive cars without insurance, without a license, and pretty much like they drive on Mexican highways. This is costly and dangerous, I said, to others whom they might harm. What if, I said, one of them was drunk and slammed into one of our own family members? Maybe we would see the danger then?

At that point she looked at me rather astonished. I thought she might be offended, but then she said, “It is very incredible that you say that because right now I am returning home to

North Carolina to attend the funeral of my sister who was just killed by a drunk driver who is an illegal alien from Mexico.”

Well, I talked to her some more and found out that her parents were PCA missionaries, back in the states for a time, and that she had grown up in a Christian family, active in the reformed church. And as I kept talking with her she told me that she lived in a house in Mexico City and had a serious relationship with a young man, a Mexican. I don't recall if she said she was living with him but I could tell that she was a bit sheepish about that relationship.

And then I asked her if this man were a Christian. She said no. He was raised as a Roman Catholic but no, he is not a Christian. And then she was rather quiet.

Well, what to say? I told her as best I could – “Don't ever go back there again. You are at a real crossroads of decision. Let someone else go down and round up your belongings, but don't you go back there or you will stay in that relationship that you know is not one the Lord wants you in.” She was quiet and said quietly, “I know.”

The plane landed shortly after and I remember looking at her as she walked away in the crowd. I have often

wondered what decision she made.

Listen now – here is the very kind of choice that can result in the unpardonable sin. Someone who knows. Someone who has tasted the goodness of Christ. Someone who now, “by chance” sat by a pastor on a plane and was warned and encouraged to follow Christ. What god will she serve? Christ or her appetite?

Most such people choose the bowl of mush and join the ranks of the Esaus. What choice will you make? What choice are you making? The Day that Christ comes, all else will be nothing.

Luk 17:26-30 Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. (27) They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. (28) Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot--they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, (29) but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all-- (30) so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.