

Unpardonable Sin

Against the Holy Spirit

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Many a Christian has been challenged by what the Lord said in our reading this evening, particularly about sin against the Holy Spirit not being forgiven. Some who are unconverted have been tempted to think that, well, maybe they've committed this unforgivable sin and, therefore, cannot become a believer. Either way, it can be a puzzling statement that it would seem on the page there that the Lord Jesus Christ said himself that there is a sin that God will not forgive.

I recently read of a young man who had thought something wrong about the Holy Spirit. I don't know what it was, it didn't say what it was in what I was reading, but he said something out of place concerning God the Holy Spirit, and although he said he did not mean it and he had asked for forgiveness, he was troubled in that as he read these verses, he felt that he could not be forgiven. It was a great stumblingblock to him and I have met Christians who have found these verses to be a stumblingblock and I would like by the help of the Lord to try and open up these verses that we might see what was going on, we might see what the Lord meant by these words, and that if we are troubled or puzzled by these verses, we might come to understand them, and by understanding them we might find comfort in them, and that we might be able to further give a reason for the hope that is within us.

Let me read the two verses that are the verses that are really at the center of what we're talking about this evening, although I ask for patience because we need to spend some time leading up to these verses in order to understand them. But let me read verses 31 and 32. Jesus is speaking and he says,

31 Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. 32 And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world [or age], neither in the world [or age] to come.

We must never take a verse out of context. We must never wrench it out of the chapter in order to understand the context in what it is, so I want to work my way up, as it were, to this crunch issue.

The first thing that's important for us to understand is: the nature of God is to forgive. It might seem strange to talk about the, if you like, the unpardonable sin and then to sing a hymn as we just had, "Who is a pardoning God like thee?" There is no conflict in those things as we shall see. The nature of God is to forgive. It says in our text there in that verse 31, "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men," so at the beginning of those verses we have, first of all, a statement of the nature of God, that is his nature to forgive, and anyone who knows anything about the God of the Bible knows that God is a forgiving God. If you like, forgiveness is what God does.

Isaiah speaks about God who doesn't just pardon but it says he will abundantly pardon. Psalm 103 speaks about God forgiving all our iniquities. The Bible is threaded through with the nature of God being forgiveness. He forgives Adam and Eve in he provided a means whereby they were brought back into fellowship. He kills animals, provides them with skins and a covering, and he has fellowship with them. He forgives David for murder. In the New Testament, the Lord forgives Peter for denying him. And Paul says that he is the chief of sinners and yet he is forgiven of God. In fact, we reach almost a pinnacle when the Lord himself forgives those who nailed him to the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Jesus Christ in the New Testament there invites people to come to him. What for? To have their sin forgiven. It's the heart of the Gospel, isn't it, that as sinners we need forgiveness and we can only find forgiveness in Jesus Christ. God will forgive us for Christ's sake. We are forgiven because of the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And Andy Robertson this morning, he quoted, didn't he, from Ephesians. Isn't that amazing that, you know, I stand down one Sunday morning and think you'll have a rest from Ephesians and there he is, he reads from the book of Ephesians. But there we are, we trust that's the leading of the Spirit.

What did he read? Chapter 1, verse 7, Jesus Christ, "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." It goes to the very heart of the Gospel. Of course, there is a condition on that, and that is that this free forgiveness is dependent on our repentance. We read elsewhere that the Lord grants repentance. We have to see and accept, again as Andy was saying this morning to the young people looking at the commandments, that we have to agree, don't we? We have to be sorrowful for our sin. We have to see that we are sinners and come before him and that we've grieved the Lord, and when we come with a repentant heart, then there is forgiveness with God.

So I don't think anyone who reads the Bible with whatever view, as it were, can come to a different conclusion than the very nature of God is one of forgiveness. Secondly, we see the nature of humanity and here we begin to see what was going on in the passage we read in Matthew 12. The nature of humanity, the old nature, the sinful nature, is to resist the claims and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is what sin does to us, it gives us that built-in resistance. Even Adam and Eve as soon as they sinned, they resisted the Lord in the sense they had to hide. They were shameful of themselves. Even though they

had covered their nakedness, which they were not aware of whilst they were in that state of innocence, but as soon as they sinned, they were aware of their shame and they even made themselves clothes. So in that sense, it wasn't just the shame of nakedness but they still hid, there was a shame of coming before God, to resist, they didn't really want to see him and give an account of themselves any longer, and we will stay that way, resisting the claims of Christ, unless we know the intervention of the Spirit of God to change our nature, to give us a new nature, to regenerate us, to give us that new life in Jesus Christ.

In the passage that we've read, we see the Pharisees and I think if we compare the Gospels, we might find also there are some people called the Herodians and maybe even some Sadducees that were in this particular crowd, and it's difficult for us to understand where we are in history, to understand the importance and the greatness of the moment historically at this time for Israel. The nation that these people, the Pharisees in particular, that they represented religiously, these people had since time began, more or less, certainly from Genesis 3:15 right at the beginning as soon as time began, they were after the fall, this nation had begun to look for the Deliverer. It wasn't until later that the nation of Israel was particularly identified but they were looking for the promised Messiah. And everyone, they went to the synagogue and they got the scrolls out and they read from Isaiah about the Messiah coming, they read from the prophecy of Micah as to where he would come and they were familiar with all of this. The hopes of the nation depended on a Deliverer, the Messiah. It was everyone's aspiration to be alive when the Messiah came. The Jews just wanted to see their Jewish Messiah. "Deliver us from Rome. Deliver us from all the bondage that we've had over the years. Make us a nation again." It was every mother's dream that their daughter should bear the Messiah, the very Son of God.

Now here he was. All of those hundreds of years, thousands of years of looking towards the Deliverer and here he was. Angels had announced his birth but it had gone quiet. Gone quiet for about 30 years. There was this incident where a young man went into the temple and debated with the religious leaders there but that kind of went away again. But now here he was, someone claiming to be this Messiah, someone claiming to be the answer to all their prayers, the answer to all their prophecies. The reason why the Pharisees and the Sadducees were doing all that they were doing, or should have been doing, was right in front of them, but the dilemma was this: that if he was the Christ, we're out of a job. Everything the Pharisees were doing was a long way from Scripture. If you like, Scripture was here and they were here and Christ had come to fulfill the Scripture and there was a great gap between them. They were dead in the water, if this was the Messiah. But whatever the answer to all that was going on that Jesus was doing, whatever the answer is to this man, it's not that he's the Messiah.

That was fairly determined in their hearts and minds and that rings a bell, doesn't it? I remember reading not so long ago in a book that scientists were saying, "We don't know the answers to some of these questions about creation. What we do know is the answer is not God." They were starting right at the wrong end, weren't they? And people say that today not only about creation but about many issues in the word. When we start from a biblical point of view people say, "Well, we don't understand this but what we do know is that's not the answer." Human nature has not changed. That is the nature of humanity. So

if we think people are different today, we've only got to look around the world and see they're not really any different to the Pharisees in this chapter 12.

So these religious leaders follow Christ. Wherever he goes, you'll find usually there are some Pharisees there. They want to listen to every conversation. They want to watch everything he does to try and trick him and to try and show to the people who were in great numbers following Christ, that this man's a fraud; that whatever he is, he's not the Messiah. In fact, they were so desperate, they wanted to kill Jesus. We read that in the first verse we read, verse 14, "Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council," or a meeting, "against him, how they might destroy him." But the problem was everything Jesus did confirmed that he was the Messiah, and the more the Pharisees tried to disprove it, the more the people saw this guy is different. The people were almost saying, and they weren't particularly concerned who he was but they knew he wasn't a nobody, they knew there was something special about this man.

It says there that Jesus withdrew himself when he knew that the Pharisees were trying to kill him, but multitudes, great multitudes followed him and it says, "he healed them all." Just a little phrase there in verse 15, "he healed them all." This was a great multitude. They have no doubt brought their sick deliberately. He healed them all. There is so much in that little phrase, isn't there? Can you just imagine this? Thousands of people we're looking at here, "great multitudes," and so many are sick and they're all going home, "Look at me, I can walk! I can speak! I can hear!" And these weren't half-hearted things. These weren't people that haven't walked for years and they kind of hobbled home, these were people who were then able to run home. It was such a tremendous work that Christ was doing. The Lord was doing things that no mere human could do.

We find as we read on through the story, there was a particular character brought before the Lord Jesus who had a demon, who had one of Satan's fellow angels, we call them demons, and he was inside this man, he was possessed within this man. Physically that meant that he was dumb and he was blind and he may have had other issues as well. We don't know. Jesus heals this man, the demon is cast out and instantly the work is done.

So there's another miracle and this seems to be in the sight of the Pharisees. You see that last lot where "he healed them all, he withdrew himself." The Pharisees may not have been there, although they soon heard about it, but this man was brought in front of the Pharisees and they saw him cast out this demon. They saw the change in this man. They had to acknowledge something miraculous had happened. This man can now speak. This man can now see. Another evidence to attest that he was from God, he was who he said he was. It says in verse 23, "the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?" That's just what the Pharisees didn't want them to say.

They didn't really have a great view about this man, they were more concerned about loaves and fishes and healing etc., but they were beginning to query, "Could this be? Could this be possible?" You see, it wasn't what they expected and I suppose we can understand it to a certain extent. So then they had been looking for the Messiah for thousands of years and so they would expect something grand. They would expect a lot

of pomp. They would expect a lot of ceremony after waiting all these years and what have they got? They've got a carpenter from Nazareth. It wasn't what they were expecting and so they say, "Can this be? Is not this the Son of David?" They weren't really making an exclamation that this was it, this was him, they were more kind of querying, "Well, is it? Is it? Could it be the son of David?"

And the word "amazed" there in the original Greek language is a very strong word. We'd say today, "When they saw this, it blew their mind," and it's in a continuous tense, my understanding is. So it wasn't something that went from their minds very quickly. About in their minds, this is something that only God can do so, "Can this be the son of David?"

They had no human explanation for what they saw and the Pharisees now were actually beside themselves and they came up with the only other explanation, that Jesus Christ did this in the power of Satan. Verse 24, "when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub," or the devil, "the prince of the devils." Now it may be the Pharisees there were actually speaking to the crowd rather than to the Lord Jesus. It seems that by what's being said. It was the crowd they wanted to convince, "Don't follow this guy. He's a fraud. He's not the Messiah. Okay, so you've seen a miracle but he does that by the power of the devil."

Whether the Lord heard it or not, verse 25 says, "Jesus knew their thoughts," which refers probably they may have been a little distance away. Remember, there's a great crowd here. But Jesus knew their thoughts, everything that they were thinking, but what a shock to them. What further evidence to them that he is the Christ in that he begins to address their thoughts. They didn't say it out loud. All of a sudden he is addressing what they are thinking and here is the dilemma of human nature: either we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the only other explanation is the one the Pharisees come up with, he is of the devil. It's either one or the other. There is no other power.

It is either the power of God or the power of the devil. There's no middle ground. You see, a lot of people try and take a middle ground and they say, "He was a good man. He was a prophet. He was a teacher. He's recorded in history. He was special. It says in the Bible he was a kind man and it was sad that he was crucified at the end." Those things do not match his miraculous works. A kind man doesn't do miraculous works in the sense they don't have the power to do so. A nice man, a helpful man, a man who tries to go around doing good, to one sense, lots of people could do those things, but not the miracles. Not the miracles. You can only say he's a man of God. From God. Of God. Is God. Or the devil. And the Pharisees could only say he was of the devil. That was the only choice they could make in their unredemptive state, in their state of wanting to get rid of this man even to the extent of killing him in order that they might continue in their own ways. That's the dilemma that humanity has and still has today. If you're not a Christian, you have to take that view, don't you, early on, "Does this the man, Christ Jesus, say who he is and that's what he is to me? Or is he of the devil?"

Well, thirdly, Christ's response to humanity's dilemma. The Lord then gave them a reasoned argument and then he backed it up with an illustration. Remember, what the

Lord Jesus is doing, he's trying to prove to them or to show them the nonsense of their argument that he did this by the devil, and so his argument is that someone doesn't fight against themselves. If a house fights against itself, it's divided and it falls. So if an army has a conflict within itself and it fights itself, then it's gone, it's dead, isn't it? That's the end of the matter. So he says, "If I'm of Satan, why would I cast out demons of Satan?" It doesn't make sense. That's not what Satan does, to cast out his own demons. Now one can't say that never happens. Satan is very crafty. He may well have done that from time to time to try and prove certain things. I'm not going down that road, but that is not what happens in the main.

He challenged them concerning their own, he says "children," or the word could be "disciples." That is, the Pharisees' disciples. There was the school of Pharisees where they were in learning, they were training, and the young ones did from time to time attempt to cast out demons. So Jesus says to these old Pharisees here, "Go and ask your own students. They know what power I have and in whose name I am doing these things." So in verse 27 he says, "And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out?" How do they do it? "Therefore they shall be your judges." Josephus records that these Pharisaic disciples used all manner of incantations and various things to try and cast out demons. They would, you know, wave water or implements or whatever in front.

Whether they had success or not, we don't know, but we do in a measure, we have a little insight because if we go to, and we did this a few weeks ago in our Bible study, in Acts 19 we meet some of these young Pharisees and they were a particular group, they were seven sons of the chief of the priests. So they were very close to what was going on, although we don't know whether this man was a real chief of the priests because his name is not in the records. He could have been a complete fraudster. But nevertheless, he claimed to be one of the Pharisees and he had seven sons and they were trying to cast out demons, and to their surprise and maybe horror, one of these demons speaks to them and this is what the demon says in Acts 19:15, "the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye?" Who are you? The demon did not recognize these disciples of the Pharisees as a people who had power and certainly were not using the power of the Lord Jesus, the power of the Spirit, the power of God to cast out demons. So even the demons didn't react to these legalistic nonbelievers, but if you like, they shrug their demonic shoulders and said, "Who are you?"

So that was the Lord's argument. You don't fight against yourself, so if I'm of Satan, I'm not going to cast out demons of Satan. Then he gives them an illustration in verse 29, he says, "Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house." Christ has entered, you see, into Satan's stolen domain and Christ has overcome Satan. This is the illustration he's giving. Once we were the children of wrath, it tells us that in Ephesians. We walk in the way of the devil, but now a stronger than Satan has come. Christ has come and he's purchased us by his precious blood and he has overcome Satan. He has snatched us away from the domain of Satan. He has delivered us. This was one of Christ's great examples, wasn't it, of his power. It was his authority over demons. He had just shown that in front

of the Pharisees but, you see, they were in simple rebellion. They were in open rebellion against Christ and would not even entertain the truth of his deity.

So Christ's response here was to simply set out his authority over the devil, showing what a nonsense it was for them to say he was of the devil. You do not fight against yourself, is his argument, and his illustration is that as it would take a stronger man to go into a house and steal, so Christ, the stronger one, has gone into Satan's domain and stolen the domain that he had and Christ, indeed, is our Deliverer.

Now we come to the fourth point which really is the nub of the matter, the unpardonable sin, but we have to cover what I have done to get here. What I've set out so far sets out the important foundation to these verses. Now we have to look carefully at what these Pharisees were doing and I don't mean this in any disrespect, I sit in the congregation sometimes and we can begin to kind of, "I know roughly what he's talking about," but we do need our thinking hats on for this little bit. Look at what the Pharisees were doing. They had more evidence than anyone as to who Christ was, that he was the Messiah. They heard his words. Many many of these words in the Gospels were spoken in front of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were particularly addressed by Christ many many times. It's great to have a Bible, they actually heard the words of the Lord Jesus. They also had all the Old Testament prophecies that they could look at and study and they did study them. They had a great length of training. Their training hardly ever ended, if you like. So they had the Old Testament prophecies, they heard the very words of Christ, they saw him face-to-face. They saw his power in healing and in the expulsion of demons.

Now what more convincing did they want? They saw it with the prophecy, they saw him, they saw the miracles, they heard the words that he said, but with all that evidence, they had willingly and deliberately rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. They did that because, yes, their hearts were darkened. They did it because their hearts were hardened. They did it because, yes, they would be out of a job. But you see, they knew from what Christ said, from what they read, that they were sinners and that thought was abhorrent to them. Abhorrent to them, to a Pharisee, the people who said at one time that they measure, you know, their tithing, the little seeds that they had, some of that had to be measured so carefully in order to get the tithes right, and yet they were sinners but did not recognize that.

Jesus pointed out in verse 28 that if they accepted that he cast out demons by the Spirit of God, which is what he was doing, then the kingdom of God had come, and we know that the kingdom of God is yet to come in the sense of Christ's reign on the earth, that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about here that wherever Christ is we can say the kingdom of God has come, and if he's doing these things by the Spirit of God, then he indeed is God. They were never going to accept that.

Now the words Jesus used in that verse are important in verse 28. Jesus Christ himself says, "I am doing this in the power of the Spirit of God." Remember Christ, the second person of the Trinity, what has he done here? He has come to earth. He has laid his power down, at least to a great extent. He has laid his glory down, to a great extent. He has

picked up a robe of flesh. He is the Son of man as well as the Son of God, and the power by which he does things is not his own power necessarily but here it is said in many places to be of the power of the Spirit of God. Christ has emptied himself but he does these things in the power of the Spirit.

Now follow this thought through to verse 32 where he says, "whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him." The Son of man, they are deliberate words. If we sin against Jesus Christ as the Son of man, he will forgive us that, and this is a part of his humility, he has laid his glory by, he's here as the Son of man as well as the Son of God, and if we sin against the Son of man, then that will be forgiven. It's all part of his humiliation. "But if we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven," and that is what the Pharisees were doing at that particular time. Listen to what they were doing: they rejected Christ, and in doing so, they blasphemed against the Holy Spirit because he was doing these things in the power of the Spirit. He told them that. So by rejecting Christ at that particular time, particularly the incident we have here, they were blaspheming against the power of the Holy Spirit. But their rejection was not simply, "Oh, we'll leave this," but it was a full and apparent final rejection of the person and the work of Jesus Christ, and this full and final rejection of Christ was sealed by their statement that they considered Christ to be satanic.

Now whilst this sin is possible in our age, I see this as being particularly a relevance to the Pharisees at this time and a time to come it says, we have to be careful, it says in an age to come. It was relevant to other Jews in Hebrews 6 that we read last Lord's Day where it says if they rejected the things of God, if they rejected the Gospel, if they had even tasted of the things of God and heard all these things and they yet turned in a final and conclusive way, then Paul says there by the Spirit of God that's it. There's nothing else for you. If you won't come to Christ even though you've tasted and known of the Gospel, if you won't come, there is nowhere else to go. There is no other salvation.

This is a similar situation we find in Romans 1 where in verse 28 the Lord was so angry at people there who had turned over to gross sins, he says, "even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge." Does that sound a bit familiar? They didn't want God in their mind, in their knowledge, in their thinking. Cast away God. It's exactly where we are today. Let's eradicate God. It says, "God gave them over to a reprobate mind," that is a mind devoid of judgment. They could no longer think of right and wrong and that's why when we think of people in government and we think, "Well, they're a little better than this lot." Perhaps we put a case to them based on Scripture, they can't seem to make a right judgment. They have lost the ability to tell right from wrong. "God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient."

Then the last verse of that Romans 1 says, "Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things," and in between there is a load of sin listed, "they are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure," or have consent, "in them that do them." That's a powerful thing. It's not just those who were doing it. Think of those in government, they're not all involved in gross sin, as it were, but they consent. They make laws to make things legal.

My friends, the bottom line for these Pharisees was that they were in effect saying Christ did what he did by the power of Satan when it was by the power of the Holy Spirit. They were calling the Holy Spirit Satan. That's the heart of the matter here. They were calling the Holy Spirit Satan and Christ says, "That's unforgivable." It's unforgivable.

So there we are. The nature of God is to forgive. The nature of humanity is to rebel and we see it here in this illustration. It's not an illustration, it's an historic account with his meeting with the Pharisees. Christ sets out the folly of the Pharisees in their argument and rebellion and then we see this unpardonable sin, making a full and final rejection of Christ to such an extent as to say he is satanic; that the Holy Spirit whose power he was doing these things, is actually Satan.

So what application can we make to these things? What are the consequences for believers? In the main I think this is not something that we need to worry about. You say, "Well, why preach it?" Because some people do worry about it and I'm trying to defuse that. There are, as I said at the beginning, Christians who worry that they have blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

Well, by virtue of being a believer, we accept Christ for who he says he is and so, therefore, it is not possible that we can commit this sin. I don't think any true believer has any concern over this sin whatsoever. As Paul says in Hebrews 6:9, "But, beloved, I am persuaded better things of you." These things should warm our hearts in that we have been snatched from the grip of the evil one and we've been given all things that accompany celebration. We do not fear an unpardonable sin but we rejoice in sin forgiven. But there is a warning and that is, it's not our job to determine particularly people who have committed such a sin. We can note what people do. This is something between God and them. We leave it to the Judge of all the earth. Then to any outside of Christ, well, is he who he says he is or is he not? He is either who he says he is or of the devil. We may know that and simply ignore it but we do that at our peril. If he be the Christ, if he be the Savior of sinners, then we need to seek him.

We were looking at words recently in our Bible study that Paul used a number of times and it is our response, if you like, to the promptings of the Spirit as we call upon the name of the Lord, and that's a very embracing statement, isn't it, by calling upon the name of the Lord to save us. With the heart, it says, we believe, and with the mouth confession is made. It doesn't mean simply we say words, it means more than that, it means that's how we live. Abides on our lips. We then live as Christians. We cast out all upon him. And then there could be a non-Christian who is saying, "But I might have committed this sin." My friends, if you're seeking the Lord, you haven't committed this sin. If you had committed this sin, you would say, "Well, I believe Christ is Satan," and well, you wouldn't seek him anyway, would you? But very virtue of the fact that any are seeking the Lord, then you need to just put this sin to one side. It is not something that you would commit if you are seeking Christ.

So may the Lord so help us and may we rejoice in a giving, loving Savior, and may it be to the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.