



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI † DEO † GLORIA

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

Sermon Notes

The Unpardonable Sin

Matthew 12:22-32

January 3, 2010

Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed, so that the man spoke and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.’ 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. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 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. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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 week, I had planned to preach on Hebrews 10:26-31, the final warning in the Book of Hebrews against apostasy.
- ❑ However, as I prepared for this text, I found myself spending a great deal of time in Matthew 12:22-32 – the well-known text which mentions the danger of the unpardonable sin.
- ❑ Therefore, I decided to spend an entire sermon on Matthew 12, for the purposes of explaining the unpardonable sin and its application to the warning found in the Book of Hebrews. Next week, then, we will be able to have a richer and much more in-depth study of Hebrews 10 because of our study this week in Matthew 12.

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I. Jesus Heals the Demoniac

- ❑ Matthew opens this passage by describing a miraculous healing by Jesus of a demon-possessed man.
- ❑ However, the man was not only demon-oppressed, but he was blind and mute.
- ❑ It is imperative, though, for the modern-day reader to understand the purpose of the miracles of Jesus. Certainly, they were intended to reveal the deity of Jesus Christ by showing His power over creation and the laws of physics. However, they also are a shadow or picture of our own salvation.
- ❑ In this particular case, a demon-oppressed, blind, and dumb man was brought to Jesus. **Like our own salvation, the man was unable to approach Christ on his own, for he was unable to see.**
- ❑ Yet, Christ took the initiative and healed the man. Matthew states that the “**man spoke and saw.**” In other words, the healing was **thorough**. Christ’s healing of His people is always thorough and complete.
- ❑ The description of this healing by Matthew is quite brief. However, brief as it was, it demonstrated a fulfillment of **Isaiah 35:5-6**:

*Then the eyes of the blind shall open, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.
For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;*

- ❑ But, one of the primary points of the healing appears to be that it providentially led to a confrontation with the Pharisees where Christ makes one of the sternest warnings to His adversaries.

II. The Crowds Respond

- The first group to respond to Jesus' miracles, according to Matthew, was the crowd of people.
- Matthew states that they “were **amazed**...”
- The crowds were “astonished.” The word in the original Greek literally means “to displace, put outside, stand aside from.” Therefore, they were “beside themselves” with amazement.
- Secondly, however, Matthew writes that they said, “Can this be the Son of David?”
 - In contrast to the Pharisees, the crowds were likely uneducated Jews. However, they knew the Old Testament, and recognized the works of Christ as possible Messianic signs.
 - **In other words, the simplest explanation as to why Christ was able to do what he did was that he was the long-awaited Messiah.**
 - In fact, they asked if he was “the Son of David.”
 - The title **Son of David** was one of multiple biblical titles for the Messiah (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3; Isaiah 9:6-7).
 - This would be the title that the crowds would later ascribe to Jesus when they hailed Him as their Messiah and King during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9).
- The point appears to be that the crowds were open to the truth concerning the identity of Jesus Christ.

III. The Pharisees Respond

- Matthew, then, writes, “**But** when the Pharisees heard it, they said...” Thus, he is drawing a clear contrast between the response of the crowds and the response of the Pharisees.
- The Pharisees respond, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that **this man** casts out demons.”
- Notice that the Pharisees do not even refer to Jesus by name. It seems that they are showing Him contempt by referring to Him as simply **this man**.

- Their response also demonstrates an attempt to influence the crowd with respect to the power and authority of Christ by attributing His works to the works of **Beelzebul**.
- In this context, *Beelzebul* is another name for Satan.
- R.T. France writes, "...the commonest name for the chief demon is Satan, but we find also Belial, Beliar, Mastema, and Azazel. The form *Beelzeboul* suggests an original link with the Canaanite god Baal, and a possible Hebrew derivation of the name would be *Ba'alzebul*, 'Baal (lord) of the height' or 'lord of the house,' but how such a title came to be applied to Satan is a matter of speculation. There is no clear link with the Philistine god *Ba'al-zebul*, 'Lord of the flies,' in 2 Kings 1:2-16, though this could have been a derogatory corruption of *Ba'al-zebul*."
- **The response of the Pharisees also demonstrates an absolute refusal to objectively evaluate the Person of Jesus Christ. The crowds allowed the evidence to speak for itself, leading them to ask the most logical question, "Is this the Son of David?" The Pharisees, on the other hand, have already made up their minds concerning the identity of Christ, and no amount of evidence will sway their opinions.**

□ This is so often how we are with respect to the Scriptures: we come to the Scriptures with our pre-conceived notions of who God is and attempt to explain away "difficult" passages within the Scriptures concerning the nature of God that do not conform to what we already believe (independent of the Scriptures).

- The Pharisees (and we as well) are like the seed-pickers of Acts 17:18. Recall that in this Verse, the Stoics and Epicureans "began to dispute with" Paul, and some of them asked, "What is this *babbler* trying to say?"
 - The word for *babbler* is the Greek word *Spermologos*, literally meaning, "seed picker" [sperm-ologos].
 - "The word evoked images of a bird pecking indiscriminately at seeds in a barnyard. It referred to...someone who picked up scraps of ideas here and there and passed them off as profundity with no depth of understanding at all." John Polhill
 - This word was used of teachers who never had a unique or original thought or idea. These "seed-pickers" often plagiarized from others by **arbitrarily taking bits and pieces of teaching from multiple sources, until their system of belief was nothing but a compilation of other people's ideas.**

Yet, this is what many Christians do today. We are nothing more than ancient "seed-pickers," [although, in our vernacular we might say they

“cherry-pick”] taking from the Scriptures only that which we like and taking from other systems and religious movements what we like from them. We combine these varying beliefs [which often contradict one another!] together into a system we are comfortable with and then call it “Christianity.”

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- Yet, there is another truth here: **the evidence clearly points to the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Davidic Messiah, yet the Pharisees still reject Him.**
 - To this day, **no one rejects the God of the Bible due to a *lack of evidence***. Although it is helpful to evangelize by presenting the “evidence” for God’s existence, this is never the true reason men and women reject Christ. In fact, if it were possible to take someone and strip away all preconceived notions and presuppositions then they would accept Christ every time.
 - Yet, the reason men and women refuse to accept Christ as Savior is not because they need more evidence, but because they are sinful and spiritually dead.
- Also, from the Pharisees, we see that **the greatest opponent to Christ and Christianity is not the atheist. So often, the greatest opponent to Christ comes from within the “religious establishment.” The chief enemies of the cross are often those who claim to believe in “God”, and may even call themselves “Christian.” Yet, they refuse to embrace the all of what the Scriptures say about Christ, only what fits into their pre-conceived minds. Christ, to them, is often all-loving, never judging.**
- Yet, we must let the Scriptures speak for themselves and embrace all of what the Scriptures say about Christ and His identity as the Davidic Messiah and Savior of men.

IV. Christ Addresses the Pharisees

a. A Divided Kingdom Will Not Stand

- Then, Matthew writes, **“Knowing their thoughts, he (Jesus) said to them...”**
 - This could be an example of Christ’s supernatural knowledge, as the Son of God.
 - However, it could simply mean that Christ was wise and knew the Pharisees well.

- Then, Christ said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?”
 - **NOTICE: THE PHARISEES ARE NOT DENYING THE FACT THAT JESUS *SUPERNATURALLY* CAST OUT DEMONS, THEY ARE SIMPLY TRYING EXPLAIN IT AS A WORK OF THE DEVIL.**
 - This is a classic case of Christ’s use of basic logic to refute the Pharisees.
 - Here, Christ employs a *reductio ad absurdum* line of argumentation – that is “reduction to absurdity.”
 - His point is simple: **It makes absolutely no sense that Satan would cast out Himself – that is absurd!**
 - This would reveal a divided kingdom, and this would fail. **(This may be a veiled reference to the Divided Kingdom of ancient Israel which certainly had failed as well.)**
- Further, even if Satan *had* empowered someone to cast out demons in order to achieve a **greater deception**, it would still make no sense in the case of Christ, as he continually cast out demons, giving glory to God the Father.
- As one scholar writes, “Theoretically, of course, it might be argued that Satan could allow the expulsion of one demon in order to affect some diabolical purpose, but this would be met by the fact that Jesus kept on expelling demons; **he carried on an unrelenting war against all demonic forces.**”

b. Your Sons Will Judge You

- Then, Christ employed an *ad hominem* line of argumentation, saying, “And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.”
- Jesus’ point is clear. It is as though He is saying, “Let’s suppose, for a moment, that you are right that it is by Beelzebub that I cast out demons, then, what about *your* sons?”
 - It is most likely that the word used here for *son* is a reference to followers or pupils of the Pharisees (*Sirach* 7:3).

- Further, ancient, extra-biblical literature offers accounts of exorcisms by devout Jews who used strange formulas and incantations (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 8.45-48; *Tobit* 8:2-3; *Testament of Solomon*).
- Christ is saying in essence, “Your followers, the very ones whom you have no problem casting out demons, will be the ones who will stand in judgment of **you**, and testify to the fact that the works of the Son of David are, indeed, from God.”
- (NOTE: in the Gospel of John Jesus also says that Moses stands in judgment of the Pharisees.)

c. The Kingdom of God Has Come

- Then, Jesus concludes, “**But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.**”
- The natural conclusion, **given the** evidence, is that Christ is, indeed, the long-awaited Davidic-Messiah.
- The Holy Spirit was active in the conception of Jesus (Matthew 1:18, 20), and now was enabling Christ to fulfill all of the Old Testament during His ministry (Matthew 3:16-4:1; 12:18).
- These words of Christ demonstrate His fulfillment of **Isaiah 42:1** (and Isaiah 9).

Behold my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations;

d. The Strong Man is Bound

- Christ, then, continues His line of argumentation with a parable of a strong man, in **Verse 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.”
- In this parable, Christ is clearly associating Satan with the “strong” man. The “house” is this fallen world. **Christ has now come, in the Incarnation, to “bind” the strong man and recapture what Satan has wrongfully taken.**
- David Turner comments that from the conception of Jesus Christ, He encroached upon Satan’s territory through His preaching, teaching, and miraculous works. He states, “Most scholars acknowledge that Matthew 12:28-29 teaching the presence of the kingdom, the God’s saving power began to encroach upon the

domain of Satan during the life and ministry of Jesus. Generally, this encroachment or binding is linked in some way to the description of the binding of Satan in the abyss in Revelation 20:1-10.”

- NOTE: Matthew 12:28-29 is one of the passages which seems to indicate that Satan is currently “bound” in a certain manner consistent with Revelation 20:1-10.

e. Whoever is Not With Me

- Then, **Christ makes one of the most dogmatic statements of His entire ministry: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”**
- The concept of gathering and scattering is likely taken from shepherding (Matthew 25:32; 26:31; John 10:12; Isaiah 13:14; 40:11; Jeremiah 32:2; Ezekiel 34:13; Zechariah 13:7-9).
- Yet, His point is crystal clear: **there is absolutely no neutral ground with Christ. Either we are for Him or against Him. And if we are for Him we must embrace all of what the Scriptures say about Him...not just what we want to.**

f. The Unpardonable Sin

- Finally, **Christ shifts from a defensive position to an offensive attack against His opponents, the Pharisees:**

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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 particular passage has raised questions and controversy for centuries. Yet, the obvious questions raised by this passage are: What is the unpardonable sin? Who can commit it? - More specifically, can a Christian commit it? Is there really a sin that, when committed, prevents one from ever being saved?

- Throughout the history of the Christian Church, theologians have wrestled with the question, “What is the unpardonable sin?” Theologians have raised many possibilities:
 1. It is the denial and rejection of prophetic inspiration (*Didache* 11.7);
 2. It is a post-conversion degeneration back into a life of sin (Origen, *First Principles*, 1.3.7);
 3. Augustine implied that sin unforgivable in “the age to come” pointed to the existence of purgatory (*City of God*, 21.24);
 4. Some have even suggested that it is the failure to respond to a genuine gospel invitation (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.9);
 5. Others may believe that this is a reference to certain post-Pentecostal sins (such as blasphemy, murder, adultery, etc.).

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- Yet, given the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament that confirms that believers cannot lose their salvation, we must conclude that this warning is not for them.
- Further, given the testimony of Scripture, we must confirm that it is not a reference to:
 - Any certain **type of sin**, for all sins, whether they be murder, adultery, homosexuality, etc. are forgivable if one repents and turns to Christ.
 - The **degree of sin**. No doubt the worst sin imaginable would be crucifying the son of God; yet, even on the Cross Christ said, “Forgive them,…” It appears that even one of the soldiers standing by may have embraced Christ. Recall: Even Peter would later “speak against the Son of Man” (26:69-75), and obviously he was forgiven.
 - The **quantity of sin**. Certainly no *amount* of sin would “disqualify” one for salvation.

- So, again, **What is this unpardonable sin?**

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- We must first analyze the context of this passage. Christ’s warning is born out of the fact that **the Pharisees have spoken against the Spirit by attributing the**

works of the Holy Spirit to the works of Satan. In this context, the Pharisees were attempting to portray the messianic evidence as demonic evidence.

- The Pharisees are in such a state that they are declaring **evil good and good evil**. This is exactly what the Prophet Isaiah speaks of in **Isaiah 5:20-21**.
- Yet, we must understand that they do this because they are not saved. It is **not** that they are unsaved **because** they do this.
 - R.T. France writes, “It is...a complete perversion of spiritual values, revealing a decisive choice of the wrong side in the battle between good and evil, between God and Satan...And it is this diametrical opposition to the good purpose of God which is ultimately unforgivable...This saying is a wake-up call to the arrogant, not a bogey to frighten those of tender conscience...It is to declare oneself against God. It is to ‘call evil good and good evil’ (Isaiah 5:20).”

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- Examining the words of Christ, we see that He begins saying, “**every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people.**”
 - Typically, blasphemy is seen as profaning the name of God.
 - This will be forgiven (along with all other sins).
- However, “**blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.**”
- Christ explains Himself further in **Verse 32**, “And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.”
- When Jesus uses the title Son of Man for Himself, He is most certainly referring to Himself ***in His humanity***. It very well may mean that what Jesus is saying is that speaking against Christ in His humanity may be forgiven, given that His deity was “hidden.”
 - John MacArthur writes, “A person’s perception may not allow him to see more than the Lord’s humanity, and if he only misjudges at that level and speaks against Him in His humanness, such a word against the Son of Man can be forgiven.”
- But, then, Christ states, “**whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.**”
 - It is clear that a distinction is made here by Christ between sin against the Son of Man (the Incarnate Christ), and the Holy Spirit.

- Therefore, in order to understand this passage, it is important to understand the distinction in roles between the two Persons of Christ and the Holy Spirit.
- Ultimately, we are saved by the drawing, calling, and regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, in accordance to the will of the Father, on the basis of Christ finished work (**as the Son of Man**) in His life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

Therefore, to reject the Holy Spirit is to reject the only way for salvation. This is, in a simplified way, this unpardonable sin is the rejection of the Holy Spirit in unbelief.

- Craig Blomberg writes, “If one rejects the Spirit of God in Jesus, there is no one else in all the cosmos who can provide salvation.”
- It is important to note that this is a willful and intentional act on behalf of the Pharisees and others like them.
- The ESV Study Bible Notes state, “The sin is attributing to Satan what is accomplished by the power of God, and doing this through the flagrant, willful, and persistent rejection of God and his commands. This sin is committed today only by unbelievers who deliberately and unchangeably reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit in calling them to salvation.”
- There could be a parallel between this warning and the warning against *sinning with a high hand* in **Numbers 15:30-31** – that is “the flagrant, willful, and persistent rejection of God and his commands.”
- Yet, the point is that **by rejecting the work of the Person of the Holy Spirit, the sinner has rejected the only God-ordained means of salvation. Therefore, there is no forgiveness for the individual.**
- NOTE: Some may say that this understand is in conflict with the doctrine of “irresistible grace.” Yet, this biblical doctrine (of irresistible grace) states that those who God effectually calls will be unable to resist His drawing (for He changes their nature). Yet, the unregenerate and unrepentant sinner will always resist the Holy Spirit, and it is this resistance that is “unpardonable.” All other sins will be pardon, as long as the individual comes to saving faith in Christ through the drawing of the Holy Spirit.

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- Christ’s final words in this section are: “whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, **either in this age or in the age to come.**”

- This does not mean that people who are not forgiven may, at some time after their death, receive forgiveness of their sins. It simply means something like, “You will not be forgiven now...or ever!”

- John Gill writes that Christ’s words are true “not because the Holy Ghost is greater than Christ; or for want of efficacy in the blood of Christ; or because God cannot pardon it; but because such persons willfully, maliciously, and obstinately oppose the Spirit of God, without whom there can be no application of pardon made; and remain in hardness of heart, are given up to a reprobate mind, and die in impenitence and unbelief, and so there is no forgiveness for them...”

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- John MacArthur tells the following story: “During World War II, an American naval force in the North Atlantic was engaged in heavy battle with enemy ships and submarines on an exceptionally dark night. Six planes took off from the carrier to search out those targets, but while they were in the air a total blackout was ordered for the carrier in order to protect it from attack. Without lights on the carrier’s deck the six planes could not possibly land, and they made a radio request for the lights to be turned on just long enough for them to come in. But because the entire carrier, with its several thousand men as well as all the other planes and equipment, would have been put in jeopardy, no lights were permitted. When the six planes ran out of fuel, they had to ditch in the freezing water and all crew members perished into eternity.”

- So it is with those who reject the Holy Spirit. There is no other hope.