

Initial comments

Good morning! Let me welcome you again to Emmanuel this morning – I’m Nathanael, I’m a member of the church here. It’s a real privilege to be able to speak from God’s word this morning.

As a church family here at Emmanuel we spent much of last year going through Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life together – all of those previous sermons can be found on the church website - and we’re going to be picking that up again today with the passage which was read earlier – that’s Matthew chapter 12, starting at verse 22. There should be a bible within reach somewhere in front of you, do have it open in front of you so can follow along as we look at it.

But before going any further let’s pray and ask God to help us as we get into the passage this morning. **[pray] [TODO: write prayer]**

Introduction

“To what extent are you willing to forgive someone when they say something hurtful?” Or “how long are you willing to go on forgiving someone when they repeatedly wrong you with their words – lying, insulting, gossiping?” –These are big questions. Maybe you’ve thought about them before. Maybe it’s something on which you’ve been tested. A co-worker taking credit for your work, a neighbour wrongfully accusing your children of damaging something, a friend making empty promises in your time of need.

Perhaps we can broaden and generalise the question: “How much evil can a person speak, and still be forgiven?” We hear monstrous evil all round us – hate speech against humans made in God’s image, extremists influencing vulnerable individuals, blasphemies against God himself, all around us. Surely some things are unforgiveable. **[story or psychology today article?]**

The passage we’re looking at today has a lot to say about forgiveness, but before we get to that, let’s get into the story read for us earlier in Matthew chapter 12.

Point 1: Jesus leaves no room for neutrality (22-30)

Imagine, for a moment, that you are an Israelite, a Jew, in Northern Israel in the first century. You and nearly everyone you know are farmers of some kind, either working their own land or the land of others. There are a few fishermen and craftsmen about, but farming is the way of life for most people. You’ve been brought up in the Jewish tradition: celebrating the festivals, being taught the laws and the prophets. There are the few religious leaders – the Pharisees who *command* respect with their attention to keeping the detail of the law, and their incessant calls for all people to do better at obeying the law, just like they do. There are the Romans too, who have started imposing unfair taxes on you, and have set up a king friendly to them in Jerusalem. These are the people around you, and your life follows the pattern of the seasons and the festivals, and that’s what you know.

But you start hearing rumours of a man living in the wilderness in the south, a man who wears clothes made from camel’s hair and lives off locusts and wild honey. This man, John, sounds pretty crazy from what you’ve heard; but people are flocking to go and hear him – and his message is different to that of the holy and spiritual men you know. He’s not telling people to be better at following the law, he’s not just trying to build a following for himself, but he calls for repentance, an about turn, a transformed heart, because apparently God’s kingdom is coming soon – the kingdom promised in the scriptures, a king like the great king David about whom you were taught when growing up!

But soon the stories are no longer about John, but about another man. A man called Jesus, who is travelling throughout the northern Israel, teaching amazing things, and doing amazing things. You really can't believe the stories that you hear – but these stories keep coming. Stories from new places, involving different people, accompanied with new miracles and different teachings. The story of the healing of a leper – a man avoided by all who wanted to keep God's law. The story of the servant of a roman centurion being healed from miles away, of Jesus calming a storm and casting out demons, of a deeper and richer way to understand God's law.

There's an amazing story of a man being lowered through a roof by friends so Jesus could heal him – and Jesus not just healing the man but telling him his sins are forgiven. That's an outrageous thing for a man to say, and at that time pushed back on by the Pharisees.

More and more people are asking the question if this could be the one John talked about? The long waited for, promised one of Israel. The messiah, come to free the people of God from their bondage. But the Pharisees, who are so respected, are pushing back, instead accusing him of terrible blasphemy. You yourself are sceptical – surely no man has the power to do what the stories claim Jesus is doing, and by what authority does he teach these things?

And then you hear that Jesus is in the next town. This man you've heard so much about, who does and says such amazing things. He's nearby. Let's read again what happens: *[read v22-24]*.

Jesus has performed another astonishing miracle. In front of your eyes, Jesus has cast out the demon causing a man's disabilities, enabling him to both see and talk. *It is undeniable that something incredible has happened here.*

When I was a teenager, one Sunday morning my mother arrived at church feeling fairly unwell, and a fairly strong headache (can't remember if the fact that I was a teenager had anything to do with it, but she wasn't feeling well). Before the service started someone asked how she was and my mum replied that in fact wasn't very well and had a bit of a headache. After the service this same person came and asked how she was now, to which my mum replied that she was actually feeling much better. This person said "oh that's wonderful! You know I prayed that your headache would go away and God has healed you". This was of course true, but what this person did not know was that during the service my mum had taken a couple of paracetamol, and so her healing had been achieved through medicine, not a supernatural intervention.

In 1st century Israel, just as in our time, there were alleged supernatural healings; and no doubt some were either fake or the result of natural means. But where this kind of mislabelling a healing as supernatural is possible when it's a headache and paracetamol in your handbag, the supernatural origin of what we've just read about could not be challenged, and notably *is not challenged* – even by Jesus enemies. In a very public setting, a man's very obvious and absolutely incurable disabilities have been healed. This man who was blind and mute the text is very clear in saying could now talk and see. The question on everyone's lips is "Could this be the son of David?". That is, "could this be the long-awaited Messiah, the future King of Israel, come to liberate God's people and establish his kingdom? Could this be it?".

Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, panic then, when they hear people seriously considering whether Jesus might indeed be the promised Messiah. **So the religious leaders make an outrageous claim.**

Verse 24 – "it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

Supernatural power, which is the only explanation for what has happened in front of them, has only two possible sources. Either God as the origin, or through the derived power of Satan. The Pharisees opt for the latter, because if they admit that God's power is involved they will have to acknowledge

that Jesus is from God, something their position, prejudices, and preconceptions have made them unwilling and unable to do. Instead they claim he healing has been done by the power of Beelzebul, a common term at the time used to refer to Satan. The prince of demons.

This accusation is absurd, as Jesus (who knows their thoughts) shows it to be. *[read v25-30]* Any organisation – kingdom, city, household, church – that is divided against itself cannot stand. It is completely unreasonable to suppose that the devil would help pull down his own kingdom, to suggest that “Satan drives out Satan”. The Pharisees have already acknowledged what is obvious – that a demon has been cast out. How can Satan expect to win the spiritual battle if he is driving out his own demons!

The accusation is absurd, and second, **it is self-defeating**. Jesus goes on, saying “if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?”. Jewish exorcism was something that happened – Acts 19 has an example of the sons of a Jewish chief priest who went around driving out evil spirits. So Jesus turns the accusation around on the Pharisees – “your own people perform exorcisms, however questionable they might be, and you would never claim they were satanic. Yet when I cast out a demon you accuse me of being in league with the devil!” On what authority do they say Jesus healing of this man is Satanic, but theirs from God. It’s clear for everyone there to decide, for all to judge, whether this accusation is valid.

And yet, **there is something different about Jesus’ casting out of the demon**. *[read v28]. [TODO: Explain power from the Spirit]* The “strong man” – Satan – has been overpowered, his “house” – his sphere of influence, in this case a blind, mute man whom Satan’s demons had possessed – has been taken from him. Jesus’ exorcism is the victory of God as Satan is helpless before him. This is the work of God as evil spirits flee before the spirit of God.

Application / Exhortation

So for you, as a first century Israelite witnessing all that has happened – listening to the whisperings of the crowd, the accusation of the Pharisees, and the reply from Jesus – for you there is a decision to be made. Jesus’ words ring in your ears (v30) “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters”. Until now, as you’ve heard all these stories about Jesus, you’ve not taken a side, you’ve not been sure about anything that you’ve heard. But of course **there is no neutrality when it comes to Jesus**. Jesus has done something supernatural, and claims to do so by the very spirit of God, to be the breaking in of God’s kingdom. This is something of first importance which has an impact for your entire life because if this really is God’s messenger, if this really is God himself as he claims, then he demands your entire life. To not acknowledge Jesus is to reject him. Jesus’ acts and Jesus’ words leave no middle way.

And this impossibility of neutrality is true for us today, in Northstowe, in Swavesey, in Cambridge in the 21st century, 2000 years on from these events – being neutral is impossible for us just as it was for a first century Israelite. If that man who walked the earth 2000 years ago was God, then we need to pay attention. Many people try to find a middle way with respect to Jesus. They try and pick and choose what to pay attention to, and the rest of the time leave him to the side. They are not openly against Jesus, but neither are they boldly on Christ’s side. What is clear in this passage though, and from the mouth of Jesus, is that there are only two parties when it comes to Him. There are only two camps. There are only two sides. Are we with Christ, working with his cause? If not, we are against him. Are we gathering for Jesus? If not, we are scattering. Neutrality is not an option with respect to Jesus.

From this section we also see that **Jesus will not cause peace and agreement wherever he and his message comes**. There is no neutrality to Jesus, and when confronted with him, this division will come to the surface. We can often talk vaguely about unity, harmony, and peace in the Church and in the World, as if they were things that we ought to always expect, and for the sake of which everything ought to be sacrificed. Yet earlier in Matthew's account Jesus already said that he "did not come to bring peace, but a sword", and here he makes the division between people abundantly clear. It is not surprising if today the good news about Jesus divides homes, families and churches. It is a sad and terrible thing to see, but there is no neutrality with respect to Jesus, and it is not worth sacrificing the one who heals our deepest needs for the sake of artificial unity.

Point 2: Jesus offers infinite forgiveness (31-32)

Let's continue in the passage now – verses 30 to 32 *[read v30-32]*. We've seen that neutrality to Jesus is impossible. The thing is that every person, when left to themselves, makes the choice to reject Jesus. And this is reflected in the way we live, in our behaviour, in the sins we commit. This is something self-evident as each of us looks at the world around us, and as each of us honestly looks at ourselves.

And so we come back to the question of to what extent are you willing to forgive someone? Someone who has wronged you personally. Someone who has spoken great evil against you. Well Jesus here answers the question "how much evil can a person speak, and still be forgiven?", "how much evil can a person commit and still return to the Father?", **"To what extent is God himself willing to forgive a sinner?" Hear Jesus' words: "every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven."**

And of course this is not just limited to words – this forgiveness is available for every kind of sin! This is something that is demonstrated throughout scripture – God's forgiveness is the great theme of the bible! We've heard some references to King David already – a man who lied, coveted and stole. Who committed adultery with a woman and arranged the murder of her husband. Yet David was forgiven and is remembered as the great king of Israel who lead the people in worship to God in a way it had never seen before. Or perhaps we can look at the apostle Peter, who was almost certainly present for the events we're reading about. A man who was one of Jesus closest friends but who tempted Jesus to sin, and abandoned Jesus at his crucifixion; even calling down curses and blaspheming Jesus to avoid being associated with Him. Yet Peter was forgiven and given a place of honour in the church. What about other sins we read about – sexual immorality, stealing, greed, drunkenness, fraud? Yes, they can all be forgiven – we know because in his first letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 6 verses 9 to 11 Paul names these and more sins and adds the words "that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God."

In the verses we're looking at now, our attention is drawn to the exception, but let's take a moment to be amazed at the primary, positive statement: *"every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven"*.

Perhaps you wrestle with the injustice which that kind of forgiveness implies – a forgiveness that seems not to acknowledge that a wrong has been committed. Of course, in many cases there are immediate repercussions for sins. Broken relationships, prison, pain. But that's not always the case, and this kind of forgiveness seems to allow people to get away with performing terrible sins, with no punishment. How can God just wipe their slate clean without any justice? Because, of course, he doesn't. God's justice requires punishment. But because of his great love, he provided his own son, Jesus, to carry the debt of sin to death on the cross. In the most incredible, inconceivable, in the only way it was achievable – God's justice was performed, and his forgiveness offered to all.

Application / Exhortation

This forgiveness is the story of the bible, and it is offered to each of us today. Know that all those who vocally oppose Jesus – the Stephen Frys who label God “capricious, mean-minded, and stupid”, those who have daily spoken blasphemies against God, use God’s name in vain; are offered forgiveness. Know for yourself – whether it’s the first or the five hundredth time – that God offers his forgiveness to you, no matter what you have said, no matter what you have thought about God. No matter what you have committed. Hear it again from the words of the bible: “every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven”. Come to God confidently with your sin, ask his forgiveness through faith in Christ, and it will be granted.

And this knowledge of God’s justice and forgiveness does something incredible to each of our own ability to forgive as well. We, who have been forgiven so much, can show that same forgiveness to others. This should be the case for each of us who have experienced God’s forgiveness. I wonder if right now you can think of someone who God has forgiven, and you yourself need to forgive also?

Part 2.5: The unforgiveable sin

Of course we do need to talk about the “unforgiveable sin” – **[read v31-32]**. This is a really hard to understand teaching, and it’s one which I have not understood. It’s one which perhaps causes a great deal of worry for believers, and so the main thing I want to say now is that if you are a believer, and if you are worried about this, then have peace – I don’t believe this is a sin you can commit.

First, we’ve already seen what this sin is not. We’ve spoken about David’s sins, and Peter’s. Even while on the cross, being mocked by the men killing the son of God, Jesus asks his father to forgive them. Looking at the context of the entire bible we can say that with confidence that whoever believes in Christ will be forgiven, shall not die, shall have everlasting life.

More likely, this sin against the holy spirit is referring to a repeated and ongoing rejection of clear conviction of who Jesus is, and the forgiveness which he offers. The Holy Spirit has a unique ministry of convicting people of who Jesus is, and their need for a saviour. If a person refuses the life ring thrown to them as they drown; if someone is hardened against the very means God provides to bring them to the saviour, what hope is there for that person. Blasphemy against the holy spirit is unforgivable because the individual refuses the only lifeline there is. Perhaps this is what was going on with the Pharisees, who repeatedly reject such a clear work of the holy spirit in healing this man, and attribute it to satanic powers.

Application / Exhortation

So if you are a believer, then take confidence that you are in no danger of committing this sin. However, if you are not a believer, there is a challenge here for you as you hear about what Jesus has done and the forgiveness on offer. Consider what it is that is stopping you accepting the infinite forgiveness offered by God, and putting you at risk of committing the unforgiveable sin.

Part 3: The immense importance of our words (33-37)

So we come to the final part of the passage – verses 33-37. **[read v33-37]**. So far people’s words have been a clear focus. First in the responses of the people and the Pharisees, expressed in their words, and then again as Jesus has spoken of the forgiveness on offer. This final passage highlights why. **Our words are the evidence of the state of our hearts**, as surely as the quality of a tree’s fruit is evidence of the goodness of the tree. As surely as the taste of some water tells you if it’s stale. As

surely as the smell of a nappy tells you what's inside. Jesus here makes it clear that he judges the innermost character of his opponents by what they say about him.

Growing up I was often the one in my family who at the dinner table would knock over my glass and spill it everywhere. In fact, even a short while ago, while playing board games at the Collier's house, I reached out and managed to knock over my drink and spill it over the table (fortunately Andrew was quick enough to save the game pieces). The thing is that no matter how many times I've spilt my drink, whatever was in the cup – water, squash, lemonade or tea – whatever was inside has overflowed from it. And that's the same with our words! When words overflow from our mouth, it's because those words are from the sin stored up in our hearts.

Our words are the evidence of the state of our hearts, and so **our words will be evidence on the day of judgement**. Our words will form one line of inquiry when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. We are going to have to give account for all that we have said, as well as all we have done. But just as our words may lead us to be condemned, so they may also be crucial to our salvation. Listen to what Paul writes in chapter 10 of his letter to the Romans *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."* Again the link between the heart and our words is clear. Belief is in the heart, but it is expressed and evidenced in words. And just as we've seen all along, no matter what terrible things a person may say about God, or about anything, forgiveness is still offered to them on account of Jesus.

Application / Exhortation

How much attention do you pay to your words? We go through our daily work, speaking and talking with little thought or reflection, and seem to imagine that if we do what is right, it doesn't matter what we say. But is that really the case? Are our words so utterly unimportant? With a passage like this in front of us it should be a great challenge.

Perhaps there are times when we should be calm in our replies – "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1)

Perhaps there are times when we need to speak up more – "[**TODO**]"

Maybe there are times we just need to be quiet, because "Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues." (Proverbs 10:19).

Conclusion: Come to God and be transformed

So as I finish, perhaps you still are confused about some of what we've talked about, and perhaps some of it leaves you apprehensive. And maybe a reaction like that is in some ways appropriate to the almighty, just, loving creator of the universe. But I hope you will also see that we can have great confidence that this great God offers infinite forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Forgiveness to you, no matter what you have said, thought or done. What an awesome God.

Let's pray. [**pray**] [**TODO: write prayer**].