

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew
 SERMON: **The Only Sin that Cannot Be Forgiven**
 SCRIPTURE: Matthew 12:22-32
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 Date: December 30, 2007

I trust every one of you had a delightful Christmas. We were in Oklahoma last weekend to visit my mom and to attend a funeral on Saturday afternoon, and because of the snow we couldn't get back until just before Josh's sermon, but I was so glad I got back for that. He did a great job and the church was packed. I encourage you to listen to that message on the web, especially if you want to learn how St. Nick punched a heretic in the nose. I also appreciated Dan's leadership at the Christmas Eve service. Both of these men enabled me to enjoy a pretty stress-free holiday for a change.

Today we are going to watch the Scripture as well as listen to it. The text in the video is word-for-word from the NIV. Matthew 12:22-32:

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

"Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

I have the greatest possible topic to preach this morning—forgiveness. I know the sermon title is “The Only Sin that *Cannot* Be Forgiven,” but if there is only one sin that cannot be forgiven, that means that every other sin *can be*. That’s where I want us to put the emphasis this morning. God’s grace is so magnificent that all sins but one can be forgiven. Is that amazing, or what?

Let me start our study this morning with this important truth:

Forgiveness is the greatest need of the human heart.

There is nothing any human being needs as much as he or she needs forgiveness. All of us have

sinned, i.e. we have failed to measure up to the standards God has established for us in His Word and in His character. Our failure to meet His standards produces a sense of guilt in our hearts (to say nothing of all the other negative consequences), and the only way to get rid of that guilt is to accept God's forgiveness. We need that forgiveness more than we need money, more than friends, more than health, more than a job. It is the only thing that can provide peace of mind, fulfillment in life, and hope for the future.

Forgiveness is the greatest theme of the Bible.

Isn't that a coincidence! It is our greatest need and at the same time the greatest theme of the Bible! Forgiveness literally saturates the pages of Scripture. In the OT forgiveness was realized through the sacrificial system. Though the animal sacrifices themselves were not able to take away sin, they symbolized the future perfect sacrifice of Christ on the cross, which *could* take away sin. So the OT believers who brought their sacrifices by faith did experience God's forgiveness—on credit, so to speak, pending the death of Messiah Jesus.

Listen to a few of the scores of OT verses on forgiveness:

Psalm 86:5: "You are forgiving and good, O Lord."

Psalm 103:3: "(God) forgives all your sins."

Exodus 34:6, 7: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."

Micah 7:18, 19: "Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

In the NT the theme of forgiveness is, if possible, even more dominant. For example:

Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Ephesians 1:7: "In him (Jesus Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace . . ."

Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

I have thought a lot about the question, “How much evil can a person do and still be forgiven?” The reason for the question isn’t that I am trying to figure out how much I could get by with and still go to heaven; rather I genuinely struggle with the monstrous evil I see all around—from terrorists blowing up innocent people, to a culture hooked on drugs, pornography, gambling, and illicit sex, to violence perpetrated at our schools, our workplaces, our malls, and even our churches. I think it was when I visited the Nazi concentration camp of Dachau outside Munich that I first came to grips with the overwhelming evil of which mankind is capable. As I stood in that place of horror, I couldn’t help but think, “Surely some things are unforgivable.” But the Scriptures tell us that . . .

Forgiveness is available for the greatest sin imaginable.

The answer to the question, “How bad can a person be and still be forgiven?”, is “Very, very bad.” Can someone be forgiven of adultery? Yes, David was. Can he be forgiven of murder? Yes, David was. Can he be forgiven of lying, stealing and covetousness? Yes, David was—all at the same time. Can he be forgiven of betraying his best friend? Yes, Peter was. In the Bible we find God forgiving not only the sins mentioned above, but also idolatry, gluttony, fornication, cheating, covenant breaking, blasphemy, drunkenness, genocide, extortion, self-righteousness, gossip, and every other kind of sin imaginable. One of the greatest passages in the Bible is 1 Cor. 6:9-11. After naming these very sins, plus others, Paul adds these amazing words: “And 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 our God.”

And God is still forgiving unimaginable sins. Jeffrey Dahmer, believe it or not, made a credible profession of faith after murdering a number of young men and then cannibalizing his victims. Karla Faye Tucker was almost certainly a born again believer by the time she received the death penalty in Texas in 1998 for hacking several people to death.

In our Scripture passage today Jesus says, “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” Our tendency is to focus on the exception, but right now I want us to focus on the primary statement: “*every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men.*” That’s amazing; it’s astounding. Now please understand He’s not telling us that everyone who commits one of these heinous deeds is automatically destined for heaven. Jesus means these people are *forgivable*, but of course they are only forgiven if they confess and repent. Yet even that is incredible. It shows you how infinite is the mercy and grace and power of God that He is willing and able to forgive the worst evil of which human beings are capable.

Now you may wrestle with the notion that some very wicked people seem to get off scot free simply because they confess their sin and repent. How can God just wipe the slate clean without requiring any punishment? But, of course, He doesn’t. He requires punishment. He punished His own son, Jesus, by having Him carry that sin debt to the cross. But even the sinner doesn’t get off scot free. The scar tissue that results from sin is very painful and debilitating. And though God forgives the guilt of sin, He never promises to erase its consequences in this life.

King David's infant son died and his family ended up in shambles because of his sin. Jeffrey Dahmer was himself murdered in prison and Karla Faye Tucker was executed despite apparent repentance. And the scars of our own sins impact us until we enter God's presence. There are no freebies in respect to sin. Forgiveness is not a "Get Out of Jail Free" card.

So far we have seen that forgiveness is the greatest need of the human heart, it is the greatest theme of the Bible, and it is available for the greatest sin imaginable.

But, having said all that, there is one sin that is unforgivable. How then can we say that God's mercy and grace are infinite if there is a limit to it, that is, if there is a sin which cannot be forgiven? Because this particular sin places no limit on God's forgiveness; instead it demonstrates that some people are unwilling to *be* forgiven. But we're a bit ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to the story as recounted earlier on the screen.

Jesus performs an astonishing miracle. Someone brings to Jesus a demon-possessed man. But that is not the man's only problem; he is also blind and mute. Jesus heals him—apparently casting out the demon causing his disabilities, and enabling him to both see and talk. Everyone is astonished at the power they have just witnessed. The term for "astonished" in verse 23 means literally "knocked out of their senses." Apparently this miracle is so stupendous that its supernatural origin could not be challenged. 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?"

The Pharisees panic when they see the multitudes seriously considering whether Jesus might indeed be the promised Messiah.

His enemies make an astonishing claim. It is found in verse 24, "But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.'" Notice that they express no doubt about whether or not a miracle has occurred, for Jesus has not left that option open to them. Of course, in that day, as in ours, there were alleged faith healings in which someone with a sore back feels better for a while, or someone with an unexamined tumor claims it has vanished. However, when a blind, mute, demon-possessed man is completely healed instantaneously, even Jesus' enemies recognize that supernatural power is involved.

But supernatural power has two possible sources. God is one source and Satan is the other. 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, and this they are unwilling to do. Instead they claim the healing has been done by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Beelzebub literally means "lord of the flies." It was a slang term for Baal-Zebul, or "lord of the gods," the Canaanite deity. In the first century it was the everyday term used to refer to Satan.

Now Satan's power is delegated but it is also very real. Anyone who denies the existence of Satan or his power is making a very foolish mistake. He has the power to bring spiritual

blindness upon millions of people to cause them to believe a false religious system, and believe it so fanatically that some are even willing to commit suicide in its service, witness Jim Jones or radical Islam.

Satan also has the power to perform miracles, as was evident in Moses' day when the early plagues were imitated by Pharaoh's magicians. But Satan's miracle-working power is limited. The same magicians hit a wall when the plagues got worse, and eventually they threw up their hands and said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."¹ Clearly there are some things Satan cannot imitate and some things his power cannot accomplish, but the Pharisees ignore those limitations with their astonishing claim that Jesus has done this miracle with the power of Satan.

Jesus devastates their claim. They apparently make their accusation only among themselves, but Jesus, reading their thoughts, speaks directly to them and devastates their claim with three water-tight arguments.

1. It's absurd. Any organization, whether a kingdom or a city or a household that is divided against itself cannot stand. Abraham Lincoln quoted this passage of Scripture when He engaged the south in the Civil War, claiming that the union could never survive with both free and slave states. The Pharisees have already acknowledged what is obvious—that a demon has been cast out of the man. Well, Jesus argues, if Satan is driving out his own demons, how can he win the spiritual battle that way? Why would he do such a thing? Satan is the most intelligent being in the universe apart from God. He certainly would not assign his own forces to fight against each other. The very idea is absurd.

2. It's self-defeating. He goes on, "And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?" You see, most religions recognize demons as a reality, and most have some form of exorcism, whether real or phony. So Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees: "You approve of your own exorcisms, however questionable they might be, and would never claim they were Satanic. Yet when I not only cast out a demon but also heal the same man of his blindness and inability to speak, you accuse Me of being in league with the devil." If Jesus' exorcism is Satanic, theirs must be all the more so.

On the other hand, if He is driving out demons by the Spirit of God, then they'd better sit up and take notice, because it means the kingdom of God has come upon them and Messiah is here. Their claim is self-defeating.

3. It's contrary to common sense. "How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house." The "strong man" seems to be a designation for Satan. His "house" is his sphere of influence, in this case a blind, mute man whom Satan's demons had possessed. The only way Jesus is able to release this man from Satan's influence is to defeat Satan. Their claim, then, that He has done this by Satan's power is completely contrary to common sense.

Jesus then asserts that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. The topic

of the unpardonable sin is introduced with a general principle, offered in verse 30: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.” I think the essential message here is that *neutrality is impossible* in the spiritual battle for the souls of men. It is not necessary to oppose Jesus in order to be against Him; it is only necessary to withhold allegiance. You can’t say to Jesus, “I’m going to withhold judgment regarding your person and work. I’m going to wait and see.” Because withholding judgment is to make a judgment, namely that His claim to be the Son of God and the only way of salvation is not compelling. The person who is not a child of God through faith in Christ is actually a rebel against God.

Now with that principle as foundational, Jesus immediately proceeds to say, “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” I want to ask and answer three questions:

1. What is the unforgivable sin? At the very least one can say with certainty from the context that it is attributing Jesus’ divine power to Satan, for that is exactly what these Pharisees have done. But if that’s all it is, one might conclude that it’s impossible to commit the unpardonable sin today, since Jesus is no longer here in person doing miracles. However, there’s no indication in the text that this warning is limited to the first century, and I always assume that Scripture is applicable today unless there is good reason in the context to limit it to a particular person or group or to a particular time.

I would say that the root sin Jesus is denouncing here is “turning one’s back on clear conviction,” which is something that can be done today as well as when Jesus was here. I find it instructive that Jesus speaks of the unpardonable sin as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and not blasphemy against Himself. In fact, He says clearly that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, even blasphemy against Himself, but that against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

2. Why is it unforgivable? The Holy Spirit has the unique ministry of convicting people of sin and of their need for a Savior. If someone refuses the very means God provides to bring them to the Savior, what hope is there for that person? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable, not because God refuses to forgive but because the individual refuses the only lifeline there is. I can’t help but think of C. S. Lewis’ chapter on hell in his classic work, *The Problem of Pain*, which I have quoted before.

In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: “What are you asking God to do?” To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does.ⁱⁱ

It seems to me the same must be said for those whom the Holy Spirit has convicted and saturated with evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the World. If they turn their backs on the very truth God has provided to bring them to their senses, what do you expect God to do? Leon Morris writes cogently,

When a person takes up a position like that of the Pharisees, when, not by way of misunderstanding but through hostility to what is good, that person calls good evil and,

*on the other hand, makes evil his good, then that person has put himself in a state that prevents forgiveness. . . . People in such a situation cannot repent and seek forgiveness: they lack a sense of sin; they reject God's competence to declare what is right. It is this continuing attitude that is the ultimate sin.*ⁱⁱⁱ

This miracle was done right out in the open, in front of Jesus' enemies, evidently for the purpose of convincing them that He had divine power and was the Messiah. They looked at the clear evidence and said, "No, I refuse to believe. This must have been done by Satanic power." That, friends, is determined unbelief. That is unbelief in the face of full and convincing proof. That is unforgivable—"either in this age or in the age to come."

3. Who is in danger of committing it? I suspect there are many here this morning who have wondered at some point in time whether they might have committed the unpardonable sin, that is, done something so bad that God simply couldn't forgive it. I hope the explanation I have given has put the issue to rest for you. You are not in danger of committing the unpardonable sin because of the heinousness of your sin, or because of how many times you have sinned, or because of how many people you have hurt.

You are only in danger if you have turned your back on the clear and powerful conviction of the Holy Spirit. You cannot assume that the Spirit will continue *ad infinitum* to bombard you with more and more evidence. God is long-suffering, true, and His mercy and grace are infinite, but He has sovereignly determined that His Spirit will not always strive with man. James Russell Lowell wrote,

*"Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth and falsehood, for the good or evil side."*

Frankly, I think God is gracious enough to give most of us more than once to decide, but Lowell is right that there is one final chance. We don't know when that will be; we dare not delay.

I personally believe that anyone who worries about whether he or she has committed the unpardonable sin, probably hasn't, just like if you think you might have Alzheimer's, you probably don't. The very presence of an active conscience serves as proof that one is not closed off completely from the influence of the Holy Spirit.

None of this, however, should give the sinner any comfort that he can sin with impunity. Sin can be forgivable and still be very dangerous to your health, both physical and spiritual.

Conclusion: It's possible to carry away from this message a sense of fear, either for yourself or for some loved one. And that may be OK, for there is such a thing as healthy fear, but what I most want you to carry away is the hope and confidence that forgiveness is yours today if you will receive it! Forgiveness is yours for the asking.

John MacArthur tells the story of an American naval force in the North Atlantic during WW II, which 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 an eminent threat caused the captain to order 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 vulnerable, no lights were permitted. When the six planes ran out of fuel, they had to ditch in the freezing water and all the crew members perished.^{iv}

There comes a time when God turns out the lights; when further opportunity for salvation is forever lost. And that is why Paul told the Corinthians, "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." There is only one requirement to receive God's forgiveness—and it's not keeping the Ten Commandments, or being baptized, or joining the church, or any other rite or ritual, human or divine. It's the simple requirement to believe, to put your faith in Jesus. Ephesians 2:8, 9 states the issue clearly: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through *faith*—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works so that no one can boast."

But I want you to understand that faith is not a passive word but an active one. It's not just giving mental assent to the fact that Jesus lived a perfect life and died a martyr's death, but giving one's whole self to Christ. It means agreeing with God in heart, soul, and mind that we are indeed sinners and Jesus is our only hope.

I don't think I could justify leaving this morning without challenging you about whether you have received God's amazing forgiveness. I want you to close your eyes as I ask if there is anyone here this morning who is ready to acknowledge his or her sin before God and to put your faith in the Lord Jesus. If so, would you quietly slip up your hand so I can pray for you?

i. Interestingly, in the parallel passage to our story that is found in Luke 11:20, Jesus seems to allude to that Moses story, as He says, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you."

ii. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 128.

iii. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 318, 319.

iv. John MacArthur, *Matthew 8-15*, 315.