

SECOND READING: Mark 3:22-29

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³ So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: “How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. ²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”

³⁰ He said this because they were saying, “He has an impure spirit.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

FIRST READING: 2 Corinthians 4:13-15

13 It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

“The Unforgivable Sin”

“How did they ever do that?” “How did they do that?” Every one of us in the Reformed Worship class this past summer asked this question as we studied the architecture of churches throughout history. For instance, we were awed with the wondrous flying buttresses and stained-glass windows, the colorful figures painted on domed ceilings or the carved stone statues placed high atop tall towers or steeples of the gothic cathedrals. How did they make something so beautiful and majestic and massive and ornate all at the same time, something that just lifts onlookers to the gates of heaven? And without the advantages of modern technology too, a thousand years ago? How did they do that? I find myself also asking this question after I’ve attended one of Nathan’s concerts and after hearing music come from superb artists, seemingly effortlessly sweeping listeners up with their sounds and carrying them on a journey in their hearts and minds and souls.¹ How did they do that?

How did he do it? That was the question that the Pharisees were asking about Jesus, who’d just healed someone to the absolute amazement of the onlookers, in our text today. And, as N.T. Wright correctly concludes, *“there were only two answers they could come up with.”*² The first...they had to rule out for Jesus was obviously not doing it by brilliant artistry or by having practiced long, hard hours like the musician. Nor was he insane, for insanity doesn’t explain the supernatural.³ No, there was a power at work here, a power, that put all other powers to shame, and it was coming from somewhere.

The Pharisees, Jesus’ opponents, thought they knew from where. They thought it came from the prince of darkness himself, Beelzebul, the Satan, the Accuser. The name literally means, the “Lord of the flies” or the “Lord of filth or dung”. It was most likely a kind of slang term by the Jews for devil,⁴ a demonic power that continues to seek our allegiance. They did not envision a little red guy with horns, a pitch fork and a pointy tail, nor likely do most of us. But we can know the spirit of evil to which the Pharisees here pointed, that power or powers that is/are still actively engaged in the world, working against the compassionate and reconciling

¹N.T. Wright. *Matthew Part 1*. (Louisville: WJKP; 2002,2004), 146-149.

²N.T. Wright.

³John MacArthur. “*The Unforgivable Sin*”. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-16>. (accessed 8-18-23).

⁴ NT. Wright.

love of God.⁵ The Pharisees did not want to admit the alternative to this power as having done the healing acts. They did not want to admit that the power and spirit of Israel's God was acting in Jesus, himself, for that would mean that everything else Jesus was doing—welcoming outcasts, eating with sinners, lifting the status of women, simply preaching the upside down way of God, and pushing back against the corrupt leadership of the time—all would then be God's work too. So, what did they do? They levied a very serious accusation. They accused Jesus of dabbling in the black arts, in witchcraft. They called his spirit an evil one, hoping to thereby discredit him and lead crowds away from him.

In recent years, the great theologian CS. Lewis commented on a somewhat similar malevolence in our day. He said, *“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying, ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God,’ for that we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense, some bad-intended rubbish, about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*⁶

Right. Now, Jesus responded to the Pharisees by telling some parables. These teaching stories exposed how ridiculous their charge was. They made clear that if what they said was true, (if Jesus was satanic), it would mean that Satan was undoing his own work. Satan would be casting out Satan, dividing his kingdom such that it would fall. In other words, if Satan wants to get more and more control over people, he'd certainly not give Jesus power to set people free.⁷ No, with the advent of Jesus, God's kingdom was being ushered in...the lame were being made to walk, the blind to see, the deaf made to hear, those in captivity set free. The property of the “the strong man” (Satan) was being seized. He was being tied up as the

⁵ Nibs Stroupe. *Homiletical Perspective. Mark 3 :20-35.* In : David Bartlett, Barbar Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word. Year B., Vol 3.* Louisville: WJKP; 2009), 117-121.

⁶ C.S. Lewis. “Mere Christianity” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/6979-i-am-trying-here-to-prevent-anyone-saying-the-really>. (accessed 8-18-23).

⁷ N.T. Wright.

followers of Jesus were going the long, hard route of resisting temptation. Yes, and the power, the power behind it all was no less than the power of God, the HOLY Spirit.

So, Jesus gave then the final warning. These few words are however justifying this sermon for we are here nearing the end of our sermon series on Troublesome Bible Passages. He said, *“But whoever blasphemes against (disrespects) the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.”* It is indeed a troublesome passage for when not fully understood, it can cause enormous worry and concern by devout followers. In fact, in my time in ministry, I’ve likely received more questions about this, or similar passages in Matthew, Luke and Hebrews, than any other.

“How can I know whether or not I have committed this unforgiveable sin?” “Maybe I’ve committed the unforgiveable sin. Do you think so?” people ask. Well, the thing is this, friends.... Before anything else, Jesus reminds us all that *“people can be forgiven all their sins,”* and then, then Jesus’ offers the warning which relates very specifically to what has happened in the text. It relates to the Pharisees having looked repeatedly at the work of the Holy Spirit and despite it being so very obvious divine testimony, declaring that it was the devil’s doing, and Jesus is saying that if anyone does that, it’s not just that they won’t be forgiven, they CAN’T be forgiven. They have just cut off the very channel along which forgiveness comes. As it’s said, *“Once you declare that the only remaining bottle of water is poisoned, you condemn yourself to dying of thirst.”*⁸

It’s a serious warning made to make the comfortable feel uncomfortable. But it is also meant to make all of you who might be worrying, who might be feeling uncomfortable, comfortable.⁹ For the fact is that if you’re worried about committing this sin, it’s a good sign that God is working in your heart and you haven’t committed it. It is a self-induced condition, wherein where we have rendered ourselves unable to recognize the difference between good and evil by calling all good evil and all truth a lie and doing it long enough and often enough that we become numbed, impervious to the reality of the situation, that is, God’s relentless, never-ceasing invitation for redemption. We have resisted and resisted and resisted and after a

⁸ N.T. Wright

⁹ John MacArthur. *“The Unforgivable Sin”*. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/41-16>. (accessed 8-18-23).

while, we become so hard-hearted and sin-hardened that we grow calloused of soul, cynical of conscience. And although the grace of God is still available to us, we push away from it. Charles Williams and CS Lewis and others have taught us that whatever hell may be, the door to it is dead-bolted from the inside.¹⁰ I repeat, if you're worried about, it's a good sign you haven't done it.

Additionally, additionally, many Bible scholars, including my professor, Rev. Dr. Bill Greenway, have pointed out that the misplaced debate over some mysterious sin so horrible that it lies beyond the bounds of God's grace, is due ALSO to a translation problem. The translation of the phrase, "*will never be forgiven*" is better translated as something like, "*can never have forgiveness*" or "*never has forgiveness,*" for this rightly assumes that living in the light of the grace of God, means living forgiven and living forgiving. It is what Jesus knew these particular Pharisees were missing out on. They were being warned that their hardness of heart, hating those they don't understand, naming evil as good, not only was contributing to the oppression of others, but it was cutting them off from living forgiven, from having forgiveness, from the grace of God.¹¹

So, the bottom line for us here friends is this. Jesus is nothing other than *Lord and God* and he has given us the gift of living salvation, living in his holy Spirit, living forgiven and forgiving in this time and place, right here, right now, and forever. We can surrender to God's grace to know the joy of it....or we can turn away and not know it. It's ours to receive.....or not. **Regardless**, it comes by virtue of Jesus' endless love and his divine power, a power that puts all other powers to shame, and **regardless**, we cannot look at Jesus ever again and ask, "How did he do it?" Amen.

¹⁰ David Schlafer. "*Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World.*" In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, et al (editors). *Connections, Year B, Vol 3* (Louisville: WJKP; 2021), 69-71.

¹¹ William Greenway. "*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture.*" In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, et al (editors). *Connections, Year B, Vol 3* (Louisville: WJKP; 2021, 67-69).