

Mark: The Unforgivable Sin

Mark 3:20-30

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April 25, 2004

Now turn with me in your Bibles to the gospel of Mark, to chapter 3, and we come this evening to the section that begins at verse 20, Mark 3:20. Before we read the passage together, let's pray.

Lord, we come again to still our hearts in Your presence. We thank You for Your word that holy men of old wrote as they were born along by the Holy Spirit. We pray for grace that we might read Mark, learn, and inwardly digest. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

20 And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. 21 When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses." 22 The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." 23 And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! 27 But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. 28 Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"- 30 because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

"Truly I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man and whatever blasphemies they utter. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin." The unforgivable sin is our topic. I thought when I announced this in the bulletin that the place would be empty. Who wants to hear a sermon on the unforgivable sin? We do... because it's in the

Bible, because it's something Jesus said and it concerns us deeply. We need to know what this means. You will remember in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian has just entered the wicket gate with a burden upon his back. He hasn't come to the tomb where the burden will roll down the hill and into the sepulcher, never to be seen again. He hasn't come there yet. He's still carrying that burden. And he comes, you remember, to the house of Interpreter and he sees seven things, the first six of which need not concern us now, but you remember the seventh thing that Interpreter showed Christian: It was a man in an iron cage. And the man says to Christian,

"I have crucified Christ to myself afresh. I have despised His person. I have despised His righteousness. I have counted His blood an unholy thing. I have done despite to the spirit of Grace. Therefore I have shut myself out of all the promises and now remains to me nothing but threatness, dreadful threatness, fearful threatness of certain judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour me as an adversary. God hath denied me repentance. His word gives me no encouragement to believe. Yea, Himself hath shut me up in this iron cage, nor can all the men of the world let me out. Oh eternity, eternity, how shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in eternity?"

Bunyan is drawing from a picture in the Bible. He's drawing, as many of you will realize, from Hebrews, especially Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10. The language that this man in the iron cage is using is taken almost directly from those passages in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10. Historians think that Bunyan was alluding to a particular individual. I make note of it in the worship guide, for this evening. You can read about it later. A man by the name of Francis Spira, an Italian, a lawyer—in the 16th century, had been converted from Catholicism to the Protestant faith, had professed conversion, had embraced the gospel and then under threats had recanted, but had gone back to Catholicism and lived out the rest of his life in despair that he had committed the unforgivable sin. Some of the Reformers, Calvin wrote to him to try and help him and minister to him pastorally, but as far as I know it was to no avail. He died in that condition. Bunyan alludes to him, I think, here in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Christian asks this man in the iron cage, how did he come into this condition? "I left off to watch and be sober. I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts. I sinned against the light of the word and the goodness of God. I grieved the Holy Spirit and He is gone. I tempted the devil and he has come to me. I have provoked God to anger and He has left me. I have so hardened my heart that I cannot repent." And when Christian asks him, is there any hope for him at all? He replies, "No, there is no hope at all."

The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable, the unpardonable sin—What is it? Have I committed it? Could I commit it? Could I commit it after I become a Christian? You can dismiss these questions at your peril. But when we take the Bible seriously, God's written word, these are deeply, deeply disturbing

words and many, many Christians have found them to be disturbing. Let's look at it them in the following way.

I. How can Jesus say that there's one sin that cannot be forgiven?

First of all, how can Jesus say that there's one sin that cannot be forgiven? How can He say that? I put it that way because elsewhere in the Bible, in Jesus' own words, there's forgiveness for all kinds of sin. 1st John chapter 1 and verse 7, "The blood of Jesus cleanses from *all* sin,"—from all sin, all manner of sin. No matter how great that sin may be, it cleanses from all sin. In Isaiah, the opening chapter, words that are very familiar to us, "Come now let us reason together," says the Lord, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white a snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.'" Psalm 130 verses 3 and 4, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared."

How come? How come Jesus can say there is one sin that cannot...that *cannot* be forgiven? Isn't this the glory of the gospel, that the gospel covers all sin, all kinds of sin, all types of sin, small sins and big sins and red sins and crimson sins? That it doesn't matter what you've done—don't we say that? Isn't that part of the gospel message when we speak to sinners, words that we've heard ourselves and embrace? It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how bad you've been. It doesn't matter how black you are. It doesn't matter what mess you've made of your life. There's forgiveness in the blood of Jesus if you come and embrace Him by faith alone. Isn't that the gospel? Isn't that the good news of the gospel? "Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore; Jesus ready stands to save you full of pity, love and power. My sins, my sins, my Savior they take such hold on me. I am not able to look up save only Christ to Thee. In Thee is all forgiveness, in Thee abundant grace; my shadow and my sunshine, the brightness of Thy face."

Those are hymns that we sing, they're gospel hymns. They're dear to us. We love them because they speak comfort to our wretched souls. When sin rises up before us we drive in full gear towards the cross of Jesus Christ, for it is His shed blood and His atonement on our behalf and His propitiatory sacrifice that appeases the wrath of God against our sin and deals with the guilt of our sin forever. We glory in the resurrection of Christ, which is the Father's will, that His Son's sacrifice is acceptable to Him.

There's forgiveness for all sin except one. Is that it? Is that what Jesus is saying? There's forgiveness for all sin except one. "All sins will be forgiven the children of man and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness."

II. What is this sin?

Well, what is this sin then, in the second place? What is it? This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, is it blasphemy? Is it just plain, simple, ugly, brutal blasphemy? Look at the story for a second; the context in which Jesus speaks these words. There's a split-screen going on here. It's a bit like picture in picture. If you can get that thing ever to work on TV, if you have one of those gismos and get it to work, that's what's happening here: there are two pictures here. The first picture is His family. The pew Bible refers in verse 21, "When His own people..." And you see a footnote there to *kinsmen* and it may well be a reference to His own family: His brothers, James perhaps, his mother, Mary perhaps is in Capernaum. People, crowds of people are coming now from all over the land so that they can't even sit down and eat supper because of these people, and they try and get Him away because they think He's lost His mind. This is His own family. They think He's mad.

And then there's another picture and these are the Jerusalem scribes that come down (actually Mark says they "come up" from Jerusalem). Mt. Zion, of course, is elevated; so in a sense they were coming *down* from Mt. Zion to Galilee and to Capernaum, and these...who are they? They are the religious Gestapo. There's something going on in Capernaum and it needs to be looked into. News of Jesus has reached Jerusalem. There are crowds coming from Jerusalem up to Galilee and news of this man and His teachings and His miracles have reached the ears of the religious police in Jerusalem, so they've gone up to investigate what it is that Jesus is saying, what it is that Jesus is doing. And this is their conclusion: They hear that He's casting out demons and their conclusion is that He must be in league with Satan; His work is evil. His family thinks He's mad. These scribes from Jerusalem think He's bad. He's evil. He's in league with the devil. And Mark gives you a clue right at the end of the section in verse 30. This is what they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit." Now Jesus enters into a parable. He explains the folly of this conclusion. How can He be in league with Satan if He's casting out Satan's minions? The house would be divided against itself. How could He be doing Satan's bidding and casting Satan's minions out? That doesn't make any sense at all.

And this leads Jesus to talk about blasphemy. All manner of blasphemies will be forgiven, "whatever blasphemies they utter," verse 28. The third commandment? Is that what Jesus is talking about here? Well, no. No, because He makes a contrast: There are blasphemies and then there's a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

It's not just blasphemy. It's not just taking the name of Jesus in vain. Some of us to our shame can remember when we did that, when you use the name of Jesus. You turn on the TV and it's everywhere. People use the name of Jesus as though it were nothing, a trifle, something to add emphasis to a sentence, an expletive, a swear word, a curse word. They think that's so big, so macho to be able to take

the name of the Son of God and use it in that way. And Jesus is saying, there's forgiveness for that. Yes, there's forgiveness for that, for that heinous sin. For horrible, horrible sin, there's forgiveness for that. Doesn't Paul write to Timothy in the First Letter to Timothy, and he's describing his former life and what does he call himself? He was a blasphemer. That's what he was: he was a blasphemer. He had taken the name of Jesus in vain but God forgave him. God wonderfully forgave him. There's forgiveness for blasphemers: That's the gospel. It's not blasphemy.

Is it a sexual sin?

I ask that for a deliberate reason, because Paul raises that possibility. He writes to Corinth, you remember, 1 Corinthians chapter 6. He's...there are children present. We don't go into details, so understand what it is I am saying; but there's a problem in the Corinthian church and Paul is dealing with that. And he describes it as a sin against the body, and then you remember what he says? That the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Well, there's a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that is unforgivable. And here is Paul dealing with this sin, and it's a sin of the body, a body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Is that the sin, some kind of deviancy? No it's not, because there's forgiveness for that too. Wonder of wonders! What glory! There's forgiveness for those horrid, deviant sins that we'd be ashamed of. Blushing would occur if I would mention them now in front of these dear children. You'd blush. You'd throw me out of this building and rightfully so if I spoke of the things that people do. Do you remember what Paul says to the Corinthians? "And such were some of you." He's just given a list of all kinds of deviances, horrible things that people today say is "just part of who I am." And Paul says, 'There's forgiveness for that.' What a wonder! What a glory of the gospel that there's forgiveness for that.

Maybe you've come into this church tonight and that's where you are, in a morass of sexual deviancy. And there's forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ if you flee to Him and embrace Him and repent of your sins and cry out to Him to save you. There's forgiveness. Though it be red like crimson, it shall be as white as snow, and He will blot out those transgressions.

Is it suicide?

Forgive me. I have to ask that question because dear, dear people ask that question. Is that it? Because the Catholic church has taught the sacrament of absolution, and in cases of that nature no absolution has been possible so that's a sin that cannot be forgiven. Do you see? Is that it? NO! That is not it. There's forgiveness for that too because the blood of Jesus covers all sin and transgression.

There have been all kinds of suggestions as to what it is that Jesus is talking

about. Karl Barth, a great neo-orthodox theologian of the 20th century, thought it was anti-Semitism. The sin of anti-Semitism against the Jewish race, that's the unforgivable sin. Of course, he was writing in the middle of the 30's and 40's. The great homiletician Broadus says it's disbelief in miracles, the miracles that Jesus was performing in His own day. Some have said it's not accepting the words of the prophets and preachers through whom the Spirit is/was speaking. That's it.

What is it? This sin against the Holy Spirit, this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which cannot be forgiven, what is it? These people here, these scribes from Jerusalem, they are calling Jesus evil. They are calling Him evil. You can't have Jesus as your Savior if you insist on thinking that this man is evil. Is Jesus saying the obvious, that unbelievers will not be saved? Is that what He's saying? You know that the sin, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unbelief? You know unbelief can't be forgiven. If you die without faith in Jesus Christ there's no forgiveness; there's no second chance. There's no preaching of the gospel in some sort of Purgatorial condition after you die. Now there are people who are saying things like that. There are evangelicals who are saying nonsense like that. That's not part of the revelation of the word of God. After death is the judgment. Is that what Jesus is saying, that it's unbelief, that if you don't believe in Jesus, there's no forgiveness?

That's true. That is a truth. And if you don't believe in Jesus, and if you don't trust in Jesus Christ, and if your faith isn't rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and prophet and priest and king—then you're not forgiven. We don't believe here in this church that everybody in the world is forgiven. We don't believe in this church that everybody in the world is going to go to heaven, and we don't believe that because the Bible doesn't teach that, because Jesus didn't teach that. What happens if you die without responding in faith to the gospel? Is there forgiveness? Will Jesus turn to you and say, 'I know you didn't believe in Me. I know you spurned the Bible. I know that but it's okay. I'm going to forgive you anyway.'? Are you going to take that risk, my friend? Are you going to take that risk that that's how it is when Jesus says so very clearly in His word that that's not the way it is? But that's not what Jesus is saying I think. All of that is true, but that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

There's more to it than just the sin of unbelief. There's a deliberate refusal of the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has shown something, enabled you to glimpse your own condition and the treasure that is Jesus Christ, of the urgency of the hour; and then there's a deliberate pushing of it away, an apostasy.

Turn to Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 6. Dr. Lloyd-Jones in his forty, fifty-year ministry in Westminster Chapel in London said this was the most fearful text in all the Bible that caused more pastoral problems than any other text that he knew of, Hebrews chapter 6 verses 4, 5, and 6. "For in the case of those who have

once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible [it's not, 'it is difficult'; it is *'impossible'*] to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame."

It's more than the sin of unbelief. There's something deliberate here. There's an apostasy, a deliberate blasphemy of the Holy Spirit's work in speech. It's a deliberate falling away after having come to a knowledge of the truth. It's more than just continual unbelief until death. That is unforgivable but it's more than that. "There is no forgiveness," Jesus says, "in this life nor in the life to come." And I think Jesus is talking about something that happens before we die. There's a point at which it is decidedly rejected. The unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that He withdraws forever with His convicting power so that we are never able to repent and be forgiven. That is a solemn, solemn thing, isn't it? That it's possible for a while to give signs, outward signs that you are a believer but then you reject it suddenly in an act of apostasy.

III. What do we do with this?

What do we do with this? This is like, this is like a surgeon cutting someone open and then saying, "I've got to go now." This is a solemn, solemn thing, isn't it? What do we do with this? Let me say three things. We need to take seriously the fact that some people think they've committed it. We need to take that seriously. Spurgeon, in a sermon preached in 1858, tells the story:

I remember in my early boyhood being at my grandfather's house and seeing there a venerable lady who was dressed in black, and her mourning attire of just the emblem of her inner consciousness. She always looked sad and I never heard her speak one joyful word all the time I knew her. It was whispered to me that she believed she had committed the unpardonable sin, and I well recollect with what amazement I looked at her. I felt almost inclined to pay reverence to such a person. And being on one occasion left in the room with her, she called me up to her and said, and it quite frightened me, "Ah, you may be happy but I never can. I have committed that sin that is unto death, and do what I may, I know I am a lost soul and there is no hope for me."

Now I can't comment about her but we need to take seriously the issue, the possibility, the possibility that this sin can be committed. We need to take this seriously because these are Jesus' words. These are Bible words. It says, "Danger!" There is danger written all over these words. I wonder tonight, does your Christianity have room for this? There's a kind of Christianity, you see, that is so shallow, it's so light, it's so frothy that there's no room in it for words like this. The fact that there's an unforgivable sin, that there comes a point in the life of sin

after which the Holy Spirit will no longer permit repentance. I wonder, I wonder tonight what we are doing with sins in our lives, words like, "If your right hand offends you, then cut it off," "If your right eye offends you, then pluck it out," to take those admonitions and to take them seriously.

I think that many Christians have such a sentimental view of God's justice that they never feel the terror and the horror at the thought of being utterly forsaken by God because of their persistence in sin. They have a naive notion of God's patience and that God's patience has no end. And there's no room at all in their thinking that there comes a point of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that He withdraws forever. It's like a buzzard, you know, whatever you call those big birds that eat carrion on the roadside. You know those big birds. . It's like a buzzard who lands on a piece of carcass, and it's on an ice block and it's floating down the river. And the ice block is coming towards the falls but he's not concerned, because he looks at his wings and he says, "I'll be able to fly away. When the time comes I'll just flap my wings and up I'll go," and he carries on eating. And when he comes to the falls, he puts his wings out, but his claws are frozen in the ice, and he cannot fly and he cannot get out, and it's too late. The Spirit of holiness has forsaken the arrogant sinner forever.

But there's one more thing because I have to try and do two things here. I have to disturb those who are too comfortable with this passage. I need to disturb you because it's meant to warn you. It's meant to make you go away and hate what I said tonight.

But there's the poor, tender conscience here who cries every time they are conscious of their sin and mourns over every transgression, and I say to you, if you think you've committed this sin, you probably haven't, because the very fact that you're mourning and the very fact that you're running to Jesus with this sin, and even though you can't believe that you're forgiven of this sin, the fact that you're running to Him is evidence that you haven't committed the unforgivable sin. Because the spirit of those who have committed the unforgivable sin is that they think that Jesus is evil. You may be in the depths of sin, my dear sensitive soul, tonight, but you run to Jesus...you run to Jesus with that sin and He will forgive you all manner of blasphemies. That's the gospel. That's the glory of the gospel. Let's pray together.

Our God and our Father, we have just begun to open up this serious and solemn issue that we can scarcely take in. Give us seriousness...Give us seriousness in pursuing after holiness "without which no man shall see the Lord," and give us faith, faith that the blood of Jesus covers all sin. And ever keep us persevering to the very end, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

A Guide to the Evening Service

The Themes of the Service

We continue this evening in our study of the Gospel of Mark. Tonight's passage contains one of the most troublesome passages in Scripture: "the unforgivable sin." Consequently, we will sing hymns of faith and assurance to set the scene and prepare ourselves for what inevitably is a sobering passage of Scripture, and written for admonition.

The Hymns and Spiritual Songs

To God Be the Glory

This is one of 8,000 hymns penned in the life of its author, Fanny J. Crosby (1820-1915). Though blind from the age of six weeks she said: "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. I might not have sung hymns to the praise of God if I had been distracted by the beautiful and interesting things about me." In her lifetime, Fanny Crosby was one of the best-known women in the United States. To this day, the vast majority of American hymnals contain her work.

All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night

This great Lutheran song of praise provided the title for Paul Settle's book on the history of the PCA *To God All Praise and Glory*—expressing the reformational sentiment of *solī Deo gloria*. The hymn's German lyrics were translated by the Englishwoman Frances Elizabeth Cox of Oxford, England. The tune comes from an old hymnal of the Bohemian Brethren. Martin Luther himself wrote an alternative tune to this text. The hymn moves, phrase by phrase, supplying the Christian with reasons to praise God. Contemplate them as you sing this exuberant tune, and give God all praise and glory!

Sun of My Soul, Thou Savior Dear

The tune, "Hursley" has offended some, being somewhat reminiscent of a less than wholesome song in Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (*Nozze di Figaro*). Still, it would now be impossible to divorce the hymn from its tune!

Abide with Me: Fast Falls the Eventide

Written by Henry Lyte, this hymn has become one of the best-known hymns of all time. Lyte died within three weeks of writing these words. In his final sermon, Lyte wrote: "O brethren, I stand here among you today, as alive from the dead, if I may hope to impress it upon you, and induce you to prepare for that solemn

hour which must come to all, by a timely acquaintance with the death of Christ.” The linkage of this hymn to the content of our morning's sermon is obvious. May God grant us to sing this song with real faith.

The Sermon

Is there a sin which cannot be forgiven? Yes, according to Jesus in this passage. It is a portion of Scripture that has deeply troubled those who are sensitive to what God has written in the Bible. Some Christians have become entangled in the web of trying to identify what it is (adultery, homosexuality, murder, etc.) and like Hebrews 6:2-4, the passage has wounded, even to the point of despair. Some will recall Bunyan's “man in the iron cage” shown to Christian early in his pilgrimage and *before* he loses his burden.

At the Reformation a similar story was told about a man called Fritz Spiera, a contemporary of Luther and Calvin. He had begun so well. Impressed by evangelical Christians, he began to study the Scriptures himself and to believe upon Jesus Christ. He told others of his new joy in Jesus. He kept his membership in the Roman Catholic church, but when they discovered what he believed they brought charges against him that he was undermining the authority of the pope. He had to choose between dying in agony being burned alive at a stake or withdrawing his statements. He recanted and told the Roman church and his Protestant friends that he had given up his Bible doctrines and faith in Christ. He lived in agony for the next five years; there was no hope for someone like himself, he believed, because he had committed the unforgivable sin against the Spirit. No one could comfort him, and many people thought that his sorrow was like that of Judas Iscariot. He became infamous for what he had done. John Calvin wrote to help him and Calvin also wrote to Christians in Germany, France, and Italy about him. The Puritans often used his sad end as an illustration of the eternal sin.

What are we to make of these stories? They are, at the very least, a warning against complacency. We need to be serious when it comes to the Word of God. We dare not cast this away as of no consequence. Equally, it is all too possible to wound the conscience of those who are sensitive unduly. Care is needed, then, as we approach this passage. Preacher and congregation will need to ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom.

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