

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW



Matthew 9:27-34, Matthew 12:22-32 **Justifying Unbelief**

We are going to Matthew 9 today and also looking at a similar passage in Matthew 12.

Matthew 9:27–34 [27] And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, “Have mercy on us, Son of David.” [28] When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” [29] Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith be it done to you.” [30] And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, “See that no one knows about it.” [31] But they went away and spread his fame through all that district. [32] As they were going away, behold, a demon-oppressed man who was mute was brought to him. [33] And when the demon had been cast out, the mute man spoke. And the crowds marveled, saying, “Never was anything like this seen in Israel.” [34] But the Pharisees said, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons.” (ESV)

You really can't overstate how much different and better Jesus was than any other prophet that Israel had ever seen.

In this passage, Jesus heals the blind. That had never happened in the Old Testament era. He casts out demons, which had also not happened in the Old Testament, and it made this mute man speak.

He's doing things that have never been done before. He's not just the latest teacher, He's not just an enhanced Pharisee. He's doing the things that the Old Testament had clearly predicted that the Savior would do - the things God would do when He came:

Isaiah 35:3–6

**[3] Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
[4] Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.”
[5] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
[6] 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; (ESV)**

At least seven times, Jesus opens blind eyes, something nobody else had done. The mute are singing for joy.

Jesus is checking every box. All of the evidence is that Jesus is the One, there's no evidence to the contrary.

So you would think the whole nation of Israel would repent of their sin and turn to Jesus, and join those formerly mute people in singing for joy over Jesus.

Some do, but most don't.

The Pharisees don't want to believe that Jesus has any claim on their lives, that He is a greater religious authority than them. They would be fine with Him joining their ranks, paying His dues and rising to the top of their system. But they weren't going to think of themselves as inferior to this uneducated Gallilean. Jesus could have a place in their world, they weren't about to give their world up to Him.

And we like to think of the Pharisees like they're cartoon villains, laughably stupid, with their evil on full display.

But we are so like them - we do this all the time. We all want to be our own king, be in charge.

And we hear that God doesn't just want to be part of our lives but actually has this claim on all of our lives. So we look to reason our way out of some of His demands, or deny His existence altogether.

We are motivated more by our appetites than the facts, but we don't want to admit that, so we come up with the reasons for rejecting Him after the fact.

We see people do this with things like presidential elections. Most people know who they will vote for in November - that was decided a long time ago. And no fact between now and November would change that for most. They will pull out the soundbites that support what they decided before the soundbites were ever made. We are so often motivated by what we want to be true instead of by what is true.

We often doubt because we don't want to believe. Not because of reasons we were given to doubt.

Which is why we should be very slow to believe the doubts we have, and quick to ask ourselves what the motivations are for those doubts. Are we living in a sin that is driving our conscience nuts, and we want to get that

guilt off of us, so we're motivated to find that there is no God so we can be free? Are we really looking at evidence objectively, or are we seeing what we want to see so we don't have to bow or change?

Our reasoning can be motivated against the faith, against the Bible, against the church, against authority, and we shouldn't trust our doubts by default. We often look for reasons to suppress the truth.

In fact, since the fall in the garden, this is the natural mode of man. We are surrounded by God's revelation in creation, we know we are creations of God, we know we are covenant breakers, and we spend a great deal of energy suppressing that knowledge so that we don't have to change. (See Romans 1:18-32.)

We need to ask ourselves if our reasons for rejecting Him *really are* our reasons.

And so in Matthew's account, a new reason for rejecting Jesus emerges. A new lie that will follow Him for the rest of his life before the cross, and that will be told again and again to discredit Him. A reason that will make people pretty comfortable in rejecting Him.

Matthew 9:[34] But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons."

They can't deny there's a real power in Jesus. They've seen it, it has been proven. So they decide that the source of His power to cast out demons must be the prince of demons. Yes, Jesus does amazing things. And, they say, it's because He is empowered by Satan.

It's a lie that enables people to see but not believe, to experience the power firsthand but reject it, to deny what is undeniable. And it's a damning, powerful lie - one that Jesus warns us about in some really strong terms.

Turn over to Matthew 12 - there they continue this line of thinking, again when they see the power at work:

Matthew 12:[22] Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. [23] And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" [24] But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

So once again, He heals the blind and mute. Once again He fulfills prophesy that nobody had fulfilled before, nobody had done anything like this. And once again they pull out the company mantra: He casts out demons by Beelzebul - by Satan.

There's power in Jesus. Evil power.

So Jesus answers this with a number of arguments. In case they were legitimately thinking that could be the case, Jesus knocks down those arguments. This helps expose the fact that they just don't want to believe.

Matthew 12: [25] 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. [26] And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?"

If Satan is casting out Satan, then he is a kingdom divided against itself that cannot stand. Satan would have no reason for being divided against himself, no reason for possessing a guy so he could cast Himself out.

(And if Jesus somehow managed to get Satan against Himself - Jesus is still a force to be reckoned with - he just defeated the devil.)

Matthew 12:27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

Some of the followers of the Pharisees were casting out demons too. Jesus gave this authority to lots of people (72 in one place), and many were still Pharisees in training. They had some good things happen in their ministry. If you asked them, "Where do these followers of yours get their power?", they would say, "From God."

So you can see their bias - everything good they do must be from God, and everything good Jesus does must be from the devil. Why? Because they're the good guys and Jesus is the bad guy. How do they know that? Because everything good they do comes from God and all the good things He does just come from the devil. Why? Because they're the good guys and Jesus is the bad guy. Round and round we go.

(And we do this all the time! When my enemy does something rotten, it's because he's a corrupt narcissist just showing who he really is, never to be trusted. When I do the same thing, I was acting out of character and I have some blind spots. I was having a bad day. How do I know that? He's a bad guy and I'm a good guy. And we know this because he's a corrupt narcissist who just showed his true colors, and when I sit its just out of character.

We adopt plenty of circular reasoning to justify ourselves and diminish our enemies. We are so like the Pharisees.

Matthew 12: [28] But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

The argument is, "If God is using me to cast out demons, then he must not be against what I'm saying. And so what I am telling you must be true. It must be true that I'm the king and when I come near, the kingdom of God comes near."

Then he drives home his point.

Matthew 12:[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.

So this guy was Satan's goods - he was possessed or owned by satan. Jesus has just plundered his goods, taken this demon possessed guy out of darkness and brought him into light. He has restored him. He took satan's goods.

And you can only do that if you tie up satan first. So he must have been against satan. He couldn't have been with him.

That's why he says the next sentence (v.30)

Matthew 12:[30] Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

He's summing up his argument here - if Satan is not with him in the casting out of the demon, he must be against him. Jesus being on satan's team is just not a possibility.

So rejecting Jesus because you think He is empowered by Satan just doesn't make sense. That can't be your real reason.

And then Jesus gives a promise and a warning, and these are important for us as well:

Matthew 12: [31] Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. [32] 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. (ESV)

We read these verses and the first thing our mind goes to is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit that will not be forgiven. And we immediately want to know what that is, we want to know if we've done it, we want to make sure we never do it. And that's important stuff that we'll talk about in a minute.

But first notice how radical Jesus offer of forgiveness is. He says that (v.31) every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven. Every sin is forgivable, and every word spoken against God is forgivable. In verse 32 he says, "Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven."

And remember, the label "Son of Man" came from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. And there He described a great king with unlimited power and dominion who was to come. That's who Jesus is - that king.

And when people talk to powerful kings and leaders, they flatter.

"May the king live forever, I know that you are wise, etc." You wanted to be on his good side and didn't want him to kill you.

And here is Jesus, of far more authority than any earthly king, infinitely pure and holy and righteous and just, and he says, "If you speak a word against me - it can be forgiven." That is huge mercy - especially coming from the King. And we see that all throughout Jesus' life and death.

Luke 23 33 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said,"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In one verse you have the greatest sin ever committed and the greatest offense that could be committed against a person: they crucified him. And in the very next verse, you hear Jesus praying, "Father, forgive them."

That's how forgiving Jesus is.

He is so eager to forgive that He paid for our forgiveness with His life. And if we will turn to Him and believe, we can be forgiven even the most rotten of sins.

That is his posture toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. So if you have done horrible things, repeatedly, repent and turn to the cross of Jesus and find mercy.

So what is this unforgivable sin in Matthew 12:32? Let's read it again:

Matthew 12:32 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.

So speaking against the Holy Spirit is the sin that will not be forgiven.

Which is strange, because God is One - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit don't have different personalities and different desires. They're don't get together and have arguments at the Divine Board meetings. He is one God in three persons, but Jesus desires perfectly align with his father's desires, the spirit's desires perfectly align with Jesus' desires.

So why does it seem that the Son's posture is that he is willing to forgive even his worst enemies, even the people that would nail him to a cross. But if you speak a word against the Spirit you will NEVER be forgiven?

So how do we interpret this?

Well the context of this verse that gives us its meaning is that whole story where Jesus casts out the demon and the Pharisees say he is doing it by Satan's power. Jesus replies by saying, "If you blaspheme the Holy Spirit, you will not be forgiven."

So what the Pharisees were doing in accusing Jesus of casting out demons with demons was the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. And that sin is

something that is not forgivable.

So what exactly were they doing there?

One thing to notice is that the Pharisees never even mentioned the Holy Spirit. They mentioned Jesus and said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul." That seems to be a word spoken against Jesus - yet Jesus calls it blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

So blasphemy of the Holy Spirit must not just be something you do with your mouth - there was something going on in their hearts that makes what they are saying speaking against the Holy Spirit.

So let's pick apart that exchange again.

Jesus casts out the demon.

They say, "He's doing it with demon power."

Jesus sinks their argument and says, "If I am doing this with God's power, then the kingdom has come near to you."

In other words, the miracles that Jesus is doing by the power of God's spirit are the evidence that Jesus is real.

And if you deny even the clear evidence, then you will never believe anything, and never be saved.

The Holy Spirit is the person of God's trinity who does the active work of convicting us of sin. He is sent into the world to point out sin, to convict us, and to lead us to humble recognition of our need for Jesus. He is the only one who does that. He is plan A to convict your heart of sin so you turn to Jesus, and there is no plan B.

God wouldn't say, "My eternal omnipotent Spirit didn't work - send in the backup." There's no backup plan, because there is nothing greater than God.

So the Spirit starts to work on your heart and gives you everything you should need to believe in Jesus. But at every turn you're explaining it away, refusing to repent, finding excuses to not believe instead of looking into these things you're hearing and learning. At some point, the Spirit stops His work, and there is no backup coming.

So the unforgivable sin is not a specific sin like murder.

It is when the Spirit of God comes and presents clear evidence to your heart that Jesus is worth treasuring and turning to from all of your sins, and you explain away his work consistently, and even though he comes at you from angle after angle you refuse to repent and then he just stops that work. You deny Him and eventually He lets you.

So any sin, no matter how big you think it is, is a forgivable sin if you'll turn from it and trust Jesus. Even if you've spoken horrible things about Jesus - He is gracious.

But every sin, no matter how small you might think it is, has the potential to destroy you in this life and in the life to come in hell if you won't respond to the Spirit's work to get you to turn from sin and trust Jesus.

When, instead of responding to the Spirit's work, you deny it by believing it is evil, well there isn't another Spirit or another plan God has to convict you and bring you to belief. If the Spirit isn't enough for you, there is nothing more.

This is the warning in Hebrews 6:

Hebrews 6:4 For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. 7 For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. 8 But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its

end is to be burned. 9 Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things--things that belong to salvation

The picture here is that a great risk that people run is that they can experience much of the Holy Spirit's work on their heart and in their lives, and continually hear the Christian message while continually rejecting it, to reach a point where they will not repent.

And it is not that their sins are unforgivable (it doesn't mention what their sins are), but that their hearts won't turn.

Which means that this condition of being beyond repentance, of in our hearts blaspheming the Holy Spirit, is not a problem for people who are outside of Church, don't run in Christian circles, and don't understand the Christian message.

The people who run the risk of being in this condition are people in this room.

Maybe you come to church and you hear a message about Jesus and in your heart you say, "This is true, I know its true, I should hang my life on this," but then you go home and forget about it.

Or you're coming experiencing the worship and you see these people who genuinely love God and sing these things out to God who is there, and you have that flash of realization: He is there. But then you reject Him.

Or you see the way some Christians interact with each other and there seems to be genuine, though imperfect, love and concern there. Sometimes they do things for you that you are just so loving and nice that its hard to not believe these people have been changed by something real. But in your mind you explain it all away - they just do it because they're after my money or my friendship or they just want to tell their friends they converted me.

All of this evidence keeps coming into your life that Jesus is legitimate, you feel the conviction, you know the truth, but you continually refuse to believe. Eventually your heart's capacity to receive that truth goes away.

And that was what was going on with the Pharisees - they heard Jesus' message and it sounded true. They saw the miracles that backed up the claim. But their hearts wouldn't respond.

So Jesus says a heart like that is unforgiveable, not because your sin is too bad to be forgiven (no sin is like that), but because your heart just won't respond.

And the clear application of this is:

Hebrews 3:7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.' 11 As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" 12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Now a question that comes up immediately is, "Is that me?" Have I gone too far? Have I resisted so long that my heart will never repent? I don't want to miss God!

Only the Spirit of God in you would say, "I don't want to miss God." And if you're responsive to that, if that is the cry of your heart, then your heart isn't numb yet.

In fact, I think the only people who have gone far enough in their resistance of the spirit to never respond to him are people who also just don't care about him at all.

But, since there is a point after which the Holy Spirit doesn't grant us repentance, that should make us run from sin.

None of us really know how long we can mess around with sin and unbelief before we go over the tipping point of a hard heart. We need to feel how

serious sin is and how precious our opportunity to respond to God is.

We tend to think, "I can always repent later, after I've had my fun, after I've enjoyed sin for another season." But how do you know that the Spirit's convicting power and the willingness of your heart will still be there?

Don't play chicken with the train of a hardened heart. Don't stand on the tracks thinking, "I'll move later. When the train is a little closer. A little more. A little more. Then you're ready to jump and you look down and your shoe is stuck under a rail and you can't get it out.

Conclusion:

Jesus is true, and has been authenticated in scripture, in history, in His radical effects on any society that adopts belief in Him. There are many frauds, but far more legitimate Christians who have had their lives altered by Christ for the better. He has produced love and compassion and charity and restrained sins and saved souls. His Spirit has likely convicted you of sin, pulled you toward Him, shown you His reality.

And you will be changed by it one way or another. You'll be hardened as you continue to refuse to believe or explain it away and could reach a point where you just don't want Him anymore. Or you will be softened and yield to Him.

Yield to Him by believing and repenting.

Prayer of Confession:

Heavenly Father, we confess that we have often resisted Your will and rejected the evidence of Your power and authority in our lives. Like the Pharisees, we have sometimes hardened our hearts and sought to explain away Your clear work in us and around us. Despite Your miracles and the

undeniable evidence of Your divine authority, we have, at times, doubted and questioned Your lordship over our lives. We have failed to submit to Your loving reign and have instead sought to maintain control over our own destinies. Forgive us for our pride and rebellion, and help us to trust fully in Your grace and mercy.

Jesus, we thank you that you came while we were still sinners and gave your life so that we might be forgiven. We thank you for your radical grace and mercy, that though we speak against you our King, and even killed you, you will forgive all who throw themselves on your mercy.

Holy Spirit, we acknowledge that it is through Your convicting power that we come to see our sin and our need for redemption. We confess that we have grieved You by resisting Your work in our hearts. We have allowed sin to harden us, and we have not heeded Your call to repentance. Forgive us, and renew our hearts with Your presence.

Assurance:

**Micah 7:18-19 [18] Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?**

**He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.**

**[19] He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.**

**You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.**

Sermon Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do you see the evidence of Jesus' unique power and authority in your own life or in the lives of others around you?

- 2) In what ways do we, like the Pharisees, sometimes resist or explain away the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
- 3) How can we ensure that our hearts remain open and responsive to the Holy Spirit's conviction and leading?
- 4) How can we support and encourage one another to respond to God's call and avoid hardening our hearts against Him?