

Mark 3:20-35
The Unforgivable Sin

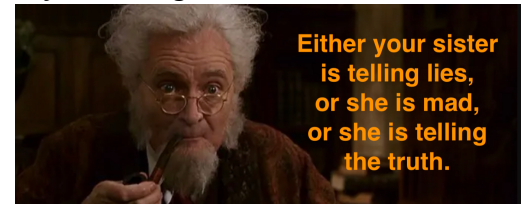
Summary: Our ideas about Jesus have eternal consequences: acceptance leads to adoption, while resistance leads to rejection.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, is a story set in England during World War II. Four children, all siblings, are sent away from London, in order to escape the German bombing. They head out to the countryside to live with a distant relative, known as the Professor. While there Lucy, the youngest girl, discovers a portal to a strange world hidden in the back of an otherwise normal-looking wardrobe, which is like a closet.



When she returns and tries to explain what happened her siblings can't decide what to make of it all. They're worried that perhaps she's delusional or making up stories to process the trauma of their situation, so they decide to go speak to the Professor and see what advice he might have for what they should do. The Professor listens intently to their description of the events and asks questions about Lucy who they describe as normally quite truthful, stable, and trustworthy. The Professor then offers an unexpected response – I'm reading from the book:

"Logic!" said the Professor half to himself. "Why don't they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth. You know she doesn't tell lies and it is obvious she is not mad. For the moment then, and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume she is telling the truth."



Which, of course, she is, as her siblings soon find out.

The book was written by CS Lewis and this scene evaluating Lucy sounds quite similar to his analysis of the claims of Jesus in his book Mere Christianity. There Lewis says that given the things Jesus said and did, He must either be a liar, a lunatic, or lord.

This morning we'll explore each of these options and the consequences for those who choose them.

When we jump into the text, Jesus has been announcing the arrival of a new kingdom – the Kingdom of God and working miracles to authenticate the message. Crowds have been gathering to hear Him and be touched by Him, things are starting to go viral, it's getting big, and that's starting to cause some issues notice:

Mark 3:20 Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. **21** But when His own people heard *about this*, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, “He is out of His mind.”

You remember last week we noticed that Jesus had to teach with His back to the water with someone in a boat behind Him just in case the crowd surged and He needed a safe way to escape. Well, now we’re told He’s not even able to take a break to eat. Jesus was just like a pop star or sports star in His day, everyone wanted to see Him, touch Him, talk to Him, and be helped by Him. And the more people He helped and healed, the more people said, what about me? Hey, it’s my turn. Jesus, can You help with my... and there’s so many people that want to see Him He can’t even take a break to eat.

So, His family (remember, Jesus had a mother and Scripture tells us she and Joseph had other kids – so Jesus had brothers and sisters), well His family are concerned for Him. They say “**He is out of His mind.**” He’s losing it, the pressure’s getting to Him. He’s getting all worked up, someone needs to do something. So, they decide to perform an intervention. They’re going to try to go and get Him and bring Him home.

Here is what Lewis labels the Lunatic option. And it includes a whole range of possibilities. Some might say Jesus was delusional and really did say and mean all these things about the Kingdom of God and about Himself as God, but He was wrong. Today someone who took this view might want to talk in very polite terms about Jesus’ mental health. The problem is, what do you do about the miracles? Remember, no one ever denied His miraculous power, not even His fiercest critics, as we’ll see shortly, they just suggested He got the power from evil sources.

Now, it’s not likely His family felt this way, they probably did not think He was delusional. After all, they had known Him for years. He never seemed unstable before, but maybe they worried that people were reading too much into things and He was saying more than He really meant. You know how if you stay up too late or work too hard you start to lose your edge mentally, you don’t think as quickly or as sharply? Maybe that’s what’s going on.

Or, maybe it’s just all the enthusiasm getting out of hand. Crowds can create their own drama and excitement, maybe He’s saying more than He means to because He’s being urged on by the energy of the crowd.

I know a man who was once the president of a seminary. He had an interesting testimony of what his life had been like before coming to Christ and then how over the years he was called into ministry and finally became the president of a seminary – it was an amazing story and he was asked to share it often. But over time, it seemed the story took on a life of its own, it kept getting a little more dramatic, with more stunning details. Until one day it was exposed that certain elements were lies - not all of it, the truth was there - but it had been slowly embellished through repeated telling. He was publicly disgraced and resigned from his position.

Now, I knew the man personally. I didn't think he was a bad man; I don't think he was masterminding some plot to deceive. I think he just fell into the trap of telling a bigger and better story that people wanted to hear and over time the true parts of his testimony became the fuel for what grew into a tall tale as he spun the truth from different angles seeing and saying more than was really there. Eventually, it all got out of hand, but I'd bet he'd say he was just trying to encourage people by what God had done – to give them more of what they wanted to hear.

You can understand how it happened, but it's still inexcusable behavior.

And you might say, well, it sounds like he was lying. And I'd say, yes, you're right, in a sense, but I want to preserve the distinction between something that gets out of hand, or that happens almost accidentally, and something that is intentionally deceptive. Which is what we see next.

Mark 3:22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebub," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons."

The scribes are religious scholars and leading authorities on everything spiritual. So, notice again, they don't say what Jesus is doing is not real. They don't say He's not casting our demons or He's not working miracles, they say He's lying about how He does it. They say it's all a big conspiracy theory. It's a false flag operation, which means you're doing something yourself but making it look like it's someone else.

Right after the 2014 Olympics, Russia began to annex Crimea which was actually part of Ukraine, but it wasn't an overt invasion. Instead, people started to notice groups of what they called Little Green Men inside Crimea – they were wearing Russian-style uniforms and carrying Russian-style equipment, but didn't have any Russian flags or other markings on their uniforms. Moscow said they were Ukrainian self-defense groups, or militias, who wanted to return to Russian control. In other words, the Kremlin was saying, we're not taking anything by force, these Ukrainians (who look suspiciously Russian) are rising up, asking for us to come save them. Later, Putin seemed to admit that yes, they were Russian marine commandos and other special operations personnel.

Well, these religious leaders were saying don't trust Jesus. He's not telling you the truth. It's all a setup. He's a dangerous liar. He's working for Beelzebub, or Satan and it's all trick. It's a pretext for an invasion.

So again, to follow the logic here – His family wonders if he's lost it, if he's a lunatic. The scribes are sure He's a liar, He's working miracles by black magic. But Jesus says there's another option, He's simply using His authority and power as lord.

23 So He called them to *Himself* and said to them in parables: "How can Satan cast out Satan? **24** If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. **25** And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. **26** And if

Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. 27 No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.

Jesus points out the absurdity of their suggestion. He's not in league with Satan, He's actually stronger than Satan and therefore He's able to bind Satan and liberate what he once possessed. So, it's SWAT team Jesus, serving a warrant, kicking down the door and putting handcuffs on Satan in the middle night while old Beelzebub is still in his boxers – that Jesus.

Which highlights something super important for you to know: Satan is not Jesus' equal. The devil is not a cross-town rivalry for the Messiah. It's not like Jesus gets a little jittery when there's going to be a faceoff. He never wonders how it will turn out this time. Jesus has absolute confidence in His authority and power. Satan is real. Demons are real. And they are powerful. Terribly powerful. But Jesus is more. The devil is a **strong man**, but Jesus is able to bind him. And sometimes, that's exactly what we need to ask Jesus to do.

When you pray it is perfectly right and good to ask God to keep you and your loved ones away from evil and to keep evil away from you and them. In the Lord's prayer, we pray: **lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**. That is right and good, but here's the deal – you're not the stronger man or woman, I'm not the stronger man – Jesus is. He is Lord. Lord of all. We ask *Him* to **bind the strong man** and to protect and deliver us.

So, there are the three options: lunatic, liar, or lord. Jesus must be one of them. To use the professor's logic regarding Lucy: *Either Jesus is telling lies, or he is mad, or he is telling the truth. You know He doesn't tell lies and it is obvious He's not mad. For the moment then, and unless any further evidence turns up, we must assume He is telling the truth.*

And here's where we come to the consequences of belief. Lucy's brothers and sister eventually make it to Narnia themselves and are able to see and experience everything Lucy shared, and more. But what happens to those who refuse to believe the evidence and trust the character of Jesus?

Well, notice what He says next:

Mark 3:28 “Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; 29 but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation” — 30 because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Here is what is referred to as the unforgivable sin, or the eternal sin. This idea occurs in other places as well, it's not an isolated event. Scripture is clear, there does seem to be something God cannot or will not forgive. The question then becomes *what is it?*

We'll get to the answer in a minute, but for the sake of transparency and to help others, would you raise your hand if you've ever wondered about this for yourself or talked about it with someone who did. Would you raise your hand if you've ever wondered, have I committed the unforgivable sin, or have you ever talked with someone who was asking the question?

OK, so here's what is super important to understand – this sin is not unforgivable because God can't do it. It's not too big for Him or too much for Him. The unforgivable sin is not an event, or an action, it's not something you do once, as if you mess up really big and *boom* there you go. No, it's something you choose *over and over again* - it's an attitude, an orientation of the heart – knowing that makes all the difference.

No one has a really bad day and just oops, by accident or anger, commits the unforgivable sin and now you're done, forever.

The unforgivable sin is to persistently resist and reject forgiveness. It's to see and know and understand the claims of Christ and flatly and intentionally refuse them. Think of Pharaoh who knew exactly what God wanted, saw miracle after miracle, and consistently, persistently, refused to obey. Those of you doing the Exodus study know he hardened his heart, and hardened his heart, and then finally it says, God hardened his heart – affirming what Pharaoh insisted on all along.

Think of the people, like the scribes and Pharisees who watched Jesus do miracles and listened to His message *and refused to believe*. Jesus even did miracles specifically *so that* they would believe – He went out of His way to give them reasons to accept Him, and they consistently, persistently, chose not to.

They had every reason to know Who and what they were rejecting and they did it anyway. Again, the unforgivable sin is not an action, it's an attitude. It doesn't just happen one time, it happens over time.

And if you resist long enough you lose the ability to accept. The person who lays in bed too long eventually loses the ability to walk – not by sleeping in for an extra hour or two, but spend weeks or months in bed and you're not going to get back up on your own. When a tree branch is young and tender you can bend it, but allow it to set in a certain position, and over time it will grow and become set and you will not be able to bend it anymore without breaking it.

So too, if you repeatedly, consistently, resist the call of God, He may, at some point stop calling you, or you may run out of time and die in your rebellion. Resistance is the unforgivable sin – denying God's call, attributing it to other sources, telling yourself or other's – that's not what God is saying to me. I don't really have to, or I don't really need to. That's not what God really thinks about that. My friend, you can't be forgiven if you never ask and you'll never ask if you don't see the need.

Last week I mentioned we all self-sabotage at times, and this is the most dangerous form of all – to talk yourself, or try to talk others, out of responding to what you *clearly know*, or *have very good reason to believe* is the call of God or the will of God and attribute it to something else. To malign His good character simply because it doesn't align with your own desires. As one commentator noted: "If you decide firmly that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a sadistic murderer, you will never give consent to the operation." (Wright).

In other words, you aren't helped, because you don't want to be helped. You are not saved because you don't think you can be, should be, or need to be.

Two hundred years ago a man by the name of George Wilson was in jail awaiting the death penalty. President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon for his crimes that would have saved his life. But Wilson refused the pardon. It created quite the legal stir and the situation was referred to the Supreme Court which ultimately determined in *United States vs Wilson*:

"A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered; and if it is rejected, we have discovered no power in this court to force it upon him."

In other words, if Wilson will not accept the President's pardon, the Supreme Court cannot force it upon him. He must remain in prison by his own choice.

So too, God is not going to haul people kicking and screaming into His kingdom. If you don't want to live with Him and for Him on earth, why would you ever want to be in Heaven where everything is centered around Him and His ways?

But if you do desire to be with God. If you do recognize that you sin, and you hate it, and you want to be forgiven of it, and grow – even if you fall over and over again, *you are not committing the unforgivable sin.*

What Christians can do though, is to grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30) or quench the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19). We can dig in our heels and be slow and stubborn about following where God wants to lead us. We can come up with excuses for why we'll do this or that later. We'll talk ourselves out of some venture of faith God calls us to take. That makes the Lord sad, because He has desires good things for us. It is a serious thing. And it is very much something we need to repent of. But we *can* repent, it's not unforgivable.

Remember, God is always calling us closer than we actually come. Let us be very clear about His motives and desires. According to Scripture:

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

In fact,

1 Tim 2:4 [God] ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. **5** For *there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,* **6** who gave Himself a ransom for all...

The history of the church includes the salvation of very, very bad men and women even in the latter stages of life. Half of the New Testament was written by a man with blood on his hands, a persecutor of the church before his salvation – Saul of Tarsus who we know as Paul the apostle. I suspect that’s on purpose – God used Paul as evidence of what He can do through the life of anyone willing to hear the gospel, receive the gospel, surrender their life, and change.

Notice again the words of Jesus here in **Mark 3:28** “Assuredly, I say to you, **all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter** – those three little English letters are so powerful: a-l-l. All. **All sins will be forgiven.** No matter who you are, no matter what you have done. If you will listen to God instead of listening to yourself, you’ll hear Him say, all of your sins can be forgiven.

JC Ryle helps us see the vast, all-encompassing nature of this forgiveness, noting that it covers:

The sins of youth and [of] age - the sins of head, and hand, and tongue, and imagination - the sins against all God's commandments--the sins of persecutors, like Saul--the sins of idolaters, like Manasseh- the sins of open enemies of Christ, like the Jews who crucified Him--the sins of backsliders from Christ, like Peter--all, all may be forgiven. The blood of Christ can cleanse all away. The righteousness of Christ can cover all, and hide all from God's eyes.

Now some will say, but what about Justice? What becomes of justice when all is forgiven? Ah yes, but that’s the beauty of the cross isn’t it? There justice and mercy meet. At the cross God calls all sin, sin. And Christ suffers for it. No one ever, truly gets away with anything. No sin ever actually goes unpunished. It is either transferred to Christ and His suffering or the sinner bears its guilt in hell forever. Justice is always served.

So, Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is lord. We either reject Him and the forgiveness He offers, and bear our own guilt forever, or we abandon the throne of our lives, fall at His feet and ask Him to retake it, receiving us as His loyal subjects. And if we choose that path, He makes us more than citizens in His kingdom, He calls us family. Read with me

Mark 3:31 Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him.

You remember they were coming to get Him.

32 And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.”

33 But He answered them, saying, “Who is My mother, or My brothers?” 34 And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.”

Now, in order to understand this, you have to remember that one of the last things Jesus did as He was dying on the cross was ask John to ensure His mother was well taken care of. Jesus loved His mother and brothers. This is not meant to show how little He thinks of them, it's meant to show how much He thinks of those who follow Him.

Last week we noticed that everything that is wrong in your life and in the world is a reflection of our separation from God, but He is working to reverse all of that and call us closer. Here is further evidence of exactly that – Jesus says anyone who does the will of My Father, anyone who asks God to direct their life instead of directing it themselves, is like family to Him.

My friends, here is what you need to hear Jesus saying: He is willing to receive you. He loves you. He cares for you. He calls you His own. Why would you resist that?

You've heard the claims of Christ this morning. You know what Jesus is saying. You have to determine – is He a liar, a lunatic, or is He your lord? It's an important question with eternal consequences and I encourage you to settle it today. God is calling. How will you respond?

Let's pray



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 3:20-35 The Unforgivable Sin

Summary: Our ideas about Jesus have eternal consequences: acceptance leads to adoption, while resistance leads to rejection.

- What do you think of CS Lewis' framework: Liar, Lunatic, Lord? Does it work? Is it a helpful way to see things? Why or why not?
- When have you seen a story or events get out of hand and take on a life of their own? Or, when have you seen truth become a tall tale? What kind of things might Jesus' family have been concerned about? Why would they think they needed to go get Him?
- When and how have you see something that God has clearly done explained away?
 - o What is the intersection of science and theology on this point? How do we balance explanations of what we can observe from science with the fact that God was still behind what we're observing?
- How does knowing that Satan is a strong man, but that Jesus is still able to bind him help you process and understand bad things happening in the world?
- Read John 15:26 and John 16:8. Who or what does the Holy Spirit testify about? Why would blaspheming the Spirit's testimony be damning?
 - o How long should God have to patiently wait for someone to finally respond to the gospel in order to be considered 'fair?'
 - o In the sermon, Pastor Jeff said the unforgivable sin is not an action, it's an attitude. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- What does it mean to to grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30) or quench the Spirit (1 Thes 5:19)? How have you been guilty of these things?
- What is the positive flip side of there being an unforgiveable sin? In other words, how does this help us see the good news that every other sin can be forgiven?