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Series: People in Step with the Spirit
Message: What is Blasphemy Against the Spirit?

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January 27, 2019
Matthew 12:31-32

There is a comic strip that shows Linus and Lucy looking out the window at a deluge of a rainstorm. Lucy says, "Boy! Look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?" Linus says, "Well, it will never do that. In the 9th chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that that would never happen again and He gave us the sign of the promise of the rainbow." Lucy says, "Oh, you have taken a big load off of my mind." Linus says, "Sound theology has a way of doing that." We need some sound theology this morning because we're coming to a passage and a story in the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew that is in some ways surprising. It is certainly dramatic and it is a very sobering text that we look at this morning. In the middle of it all is the person and the work of the Holy Spirit of God.

We are back in our series on keeping in step with the Spirit, people who walk in step with the Spirit. If we're going to be true to our desire and to take on the full comprehensive look at the Holy Spirit that we can, we obviously have to speak about this passage and about this particular incident because it revolves very much around the work of the Spirit. Here's what we want to see this morning. God's Word promises that whoever believes on Jesus has eternal life and will not come into judgment. That is God's promise and He cannot lie.

A very quick review. What have we seen? Well, we've seen a lot of things, but we're going to summarize in three ways some of the things that we've looked at. The Holy Spirit is a person and we are to have a personal relationship with Him just as we have a personal relationship with God the Father, with God the Son. So we have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is God. He is not a force. He is not an it. He is not some impersonal power. The Holy Spirit is God. Because He is God and He lives within us,

part of his indwelling ministry is sealing us until the day of redemption. We have God Himself within us.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit is not the Father, The Holy Spirit is not the Son. He loves to make much of both of them. He especially loves, according to Jesus's own testimony in John 14, to draw attention and interest to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, I think, the key as we seek to understand what's going on in this passage this morning and we'll hopefully see that as this text unfolds to us. Let's look this morning at something beyond forgiveness. As we do that, we start with the occasion at which this took place. We've already read the text and the details of this account unfold for us as the occasion at which this statement is made is given to us. It is only recorded in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Mark. It is mentioned not in the details but the statement is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. What you find is that it's never repeated in any of the rest of the New Testament. It is not mentioned in Acts or in any of the epistles. This particular incident is recorded in this amount of detail in only two Gospels. Matthew's Gospel and Mark's. I'm saying these things to help us get some context, to help us get some perspective of what is going to unfold in this passage before us.

It begins as we noted with the healing of a man in verses 22 and 23. As you read those verses as we did, you realize this is an extremely difficult case that Jesus encountered in the healing of this man. He is blind. He cannot talk. He cannot hear. It has all been brought about, we are told, by the influence of demonic oppression in his life. The miracle is a direct fulfillment of what the Old Testament prophesied about the coming Messiah. In Isaiah chapter 35 and verse 5, listen to this: "And the eyes of the blind shall be opened." When? When the Messiah comes. "And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame man shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute shall sing for joy." The Old Testament prophesied about a day and a time that would come when the Messiah would be on the earth and He would do these very words and acts and miracles that Matthew and Mark record for us in this incident.

Matthew chapter 11. Just turn back a page and look at verse 2. John the Baptist is in prison and he's discouraged about the things that are going on. He hears about what Jesus is doing. The disciples of John come and ask Jesus if He is the Messiah or should they look for another. Jesus says to them go and tell John what you hear and

see. The blind receive their sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised from the dead. All of those were not just statements of fact that Jesus was pointing out. He was drawing out of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah and what should be expected and how the people of God would know that He is here. So this particular case brings all of that to bear.

Look at verse 23 and the response of the people. The response of the people is they asked this question. They were amazed first of all, but then they asked the question – can this be the son of David? What we don't see in the English text is the way this sentence is constructed. In the Greek, the answer is very much in doubt. It's almost as if they expect a "no" answer. It's like when you ask somebody a question like "Do you expect me to do that?" In your mind the answer is "no", and so you phrase it and your tone is such that you're wanting to communicate don't expect me to do that. In this case, these people are basically amazed at what they see and they are asking the question could this be the Messiah. The indicator of their heart is even seeing all of these miracles, even seeing all of these things that Jesus has been doing, their expected answer is "no". We don't really think this is who this is. So it's a picture of unbelief in the face of this witness by our Lord.

The accusation then of the religious leaders is next. You see that in verse 24. They take it many steps farther, don't they? "But when the Pharisees heard and they said it is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons that this man casts out demons." Step back for a minute in terms of the ministry of our Lord at this point. We're in Matthew 12. This incident takes place in Mark's Gospel, the 3rd chapter. This is about halfway in the ministry of the life of our Lord. Jesus has been ministering for at least a year and a half. In light of that, all kinds of things have been witnessed and heard and seen in terms of Jesus presenting Himself as being the Messiah. The response of the religious leaders is not for the first time one of rejection. In fact, if you go back to Mark's gospel in the 3rd chapter before we even come to this event, they are so enraged at the things that Jesus is saying at various times that they are already plotting to kill Him. We're not even halfway into the ministry of our Lord and the opposition on the part of the religious leaders is so entrenched, it is so strongly hostile against Him that they are already plotting away to, as Mark says, to destroy this man.

When you think in terms of Jesus's ministry, there were basically three groups of people that you can identify that were a part of the goings-on in the life of our Lord. It was certainly the crowds that followed Him around. They were superficial and they were fickle. Basically as you read the Gospels, they wanted a free lunch. They tagged along and listened to the things that Jesus says, but it seems that most of the time they were hoping to get something from Him in terms of something physical.

Then you have the small group of the disciples. Here are these men and this little circle beyond them that are witnessing and encountering and processing what they're seeing. This group is growing in their commitment to Christ. This group is growing in our understanding of who He is. We get to Matthew 16 and it is there that Peter says in answer to Jesus's question "Who do you think that I am?" that Peter says that incredible declaration: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. So this is all happening in the life of this little circle that as they see these things happening, the confirmation of who this man is is obviously one of growing commitment and understanding.

Then of course there are the religious leaders. As I said, the response of the religious leaders is a growing hostility. If we want to know what that looks like, look at that 24th verse. You get a pretty accurate picture. They literally attribute the healing ministry of Jesus in the life of this man who cannot see, speak, or hear and is clearly under the oppression of demonic powers to Satan. That is who they are speaking of when they talk about Beelzebul. They are saying this man (Jesus) is doing these things in the power of Satan. They are announcing to the crowd to follow Jesus is one and the same as committing yourself to following Beelzebul, to following the ruler of darkness, to following Satan himself. Here you have the theological leaders of their day, the religious leaders of their day and they're leading an entire generation away from Christ. God Himself in their presence. God testifying to the fact that this is His Son through the miracles that He's doing, that the prophets of old said be looking for this when the Messiah comes. The religious leaders, the theological leaders are leading this generation of people away from Christ. The sad thing is, my friends, every generation from that which we read here until our day has experienced the very same thing. Religious leaders, theologians have regularly down through the centuries pointed people not to Christ as the unique Son of God but they pointed to Him among the

plethora of other religious choices and people and basically have said take your pick. They will all eventually get you to where you think you want to go. One of the saddest things for me as a pastor is when I encounter people and, sadly it's too often, you hear the testimony of somebody and in some cases they come to the glorious understanding of the gospel. In some cases, they are still in the process of trying to figure out where they are in their spiritual journey. But to hear that a pastor or a church or a religious leader was a part of the process of stirring all of this doubt and turning them away from Christ breaks your heart. They come to the place where they think they are going to be directed to the truth. They're told Jesus is just one of many choices because eventually everybody gets what they want to go together.

The answer that Jesus gives in verses 25 to 31 is, if it's anything, incredibly sobering. I'm going to summarize these verses with three statements that Jesus gives in answer to that 24th verse. When the religious leaders point to Jesus in the face of this crowd who is already struggling with doubt and they say if you're going to commit to following this man you're going to be committing yourself to hell. You're going to be following after someone who is going to take you to hell.

Jesus says to them first of all division leads to destruction. division leads to destruction. It's a simple principle. We've all seen it 100 times in our lives, right? Division always leads to destruction. A sports team that is divided among itself seldom reaches the ultimate goal that it would desire. It may have limited success, but when everybody isn't pulling together, they never really achieve the ultimate goal. Whatever your opinion might be of the New England Patriots, you know what? As they work through all of their issues in the off-season and everybody has given them up for dead, somehow or another as the year goes on that coach and that organization manages to get those guys all on the same page. Year after year, we're watching the same team go to the Super Bowl and half of the time or more winning it. The principle is if you're divided against yourself you don't succeed. That's what Jesus says. In marriage, if you're constantly against each other you're very likely to end in divorce or for sure misery. A church that gives itself over to bickering and backbiting and infighting isn't going to achieve the mission that God has. It is probably going to end up splitting or

again being greatly discouraged in the midst of the spiritual battles. Jesus says first of all Satan wouldn't allow his kingdom to be divided against itself.

Secondly, Jesus says He's not part of Satan's kingdom. He is overturning it. He is not part of it. He is overturning it. Jesus is Lord over all, including the unseen world, including the demonic powers. The strongman that is mentioned is Satan. Jesus is the one who goes into the house and in the illustration if you're going to do something in that house and there is a strongman in there, you start off by binding the strongman. Jesus has come to this earth, this home that Satan lays claim to. When Jesus came, He binds up the strongman Satan. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 2 verse 14 and 15 He came to destroy the works of the devil. That's what Jesus did on the cross. He gave victory because He defeated Satan and He defeated death and sin. Jesus said He didn't come to be a part of Satan's kingdom. He is the one who is overturning it.

Thirdly, He says in this struggle there is no neutrality. Look at verse 30. There is no neutrality. "Whoever is not with Me is against Me and whoever does not gather with Me scatters." Now those are disturbing words to many people. Jesus disturbs us here. He in effect says you have to pick a side. You have to choose not between a plethora of choices but between two. You're either with Jesus or you're against Him. There's no landing with your feet firmly planted in midair and not taking a side. Jesus gives only those two choices. You're either with Christ or you're against Him.

It's very similar to what C.S. Lewis said in that famous statement that you either recognize Christ as Lord or He's a lunatic or a liar. There really are just two choices. He is either Lord as He claims, or He is a liar because he's made all kinds of audacious claims about who He is. Or worse than that, He is a lunatic. He's lost His mind. That's exactly what Jesus is saying here. This is the occasion. The occasion is the healing of this man.

Now notice secondly, the revelation of this sin. The revelation of this sin. Let's start off by asking the question what is the unpardonable sin. Before even getting to the answer, let me say this designation that many of you as a believer are familiar with. You probably at some point if you've been in church life very much, somewhere along the way you've heard something about the terrible unpardonable sin. The first thing we say is that's not a designation from Scripture. That's a description of something that we have

in Scripture. That's the way we describe what Jesus says in verse 31: "Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." So people have simply taken from that and said okay what Jesus is describing here is an unpardonable sin. Anyone that reads that verse comes away with that same understanding. Whatever is happening here Jesus says it's unpardonable. So it is a description of what Jesus says in verse 31.

Let's start off by saying what it is not. What the unpardonable sin is not. The unpardonable sin first of all is not some gross immoral conduct. It is not some horrible carnal behavior. The Pharisees to whom Jesus said this were known as being honorable people. We have a very negative view of Pharisees and in some respects it's deserved, isn't it? But they were honorable men. They were people who were well respected. They were not living immoral depraved lives out in view of the public. Whatever was going on in their hearts, which wasn't good, their outward appearance certainly would not fit the description that the unpardonable sin was a life of debauchery. That is not what's happening.

I read an illustration of someone who thought they had committed the unpardonable sin. As a young teenager, they went into a period of rebellion against their Christian faith against their Christian parents. In one particular incident where they were being disciplined by their parents, they went to their room and they remember thinking and verbalizing every horrific, horrible thing that they could think of to say or think. They went on for many years under the wrong teaching that that outburst, which no doubt was a horrible one, was now characterized as being the unpardonable sin. There was no road back and there was no forgiveness. But that's not what this is talking about.

This is the unpardonable sin. Let's look at what it is. According to Jesus, it's three things. In my understanding of this passage, these three things have to be taken together. You'll see I think why in just a moment. The first one is that it is the sin of blasphemy. That's the way Jesus characterizes it. In the Old Testament, blasphemy was to treat with contempt something that God held in esteem. God was to be treated with a weightiness. That's the whole idea of the glory of God. The weightiness of God. Blasphemy was to treat with contempt, to treat with a lightness, to be irreverent. When you get to the New Testament, this particular word is a compound word. The one that

Jesus uses here means to speak against something in a hurtful way. To speak against. It is the opposite again of praise or worship. It is the opposite of holding in reverence certain things. Listen carefully! Jesus says in verse 31 that blasphemy can be forgiven. Paul in 1 Timothy 1:13 said he was a blasphemer. Paul said that. He blasphemed the name of Jesus. Paul, in the grace of God, became the greatest missionary in the history of the world. And yet in his testimony, he said I'm a blasphemer. There's more than just this matter of blasphemy.

So we go to the second thing that is involved. The second thing is to sin against the Holy Spirit. To sin against the Holy Spirit. We'll go into more detail actually in our next major point, but these religious leaders were rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah. That's what's going on in this passage. We don't have time but we could go to Luke chapter 4. We could go to Acts chapter 10. There's testimony to the fact that what Jesus was doing, He was doing in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. That's what Luke chapter 4 says. He came out of the wilderness testing and filled with the Spirit. He began to go among them doing miracles and teachings. In Acts chapter 10, it says that Jesus, filled with the Spirit, was doing the work of God. That's what's implied here. This is what is so vitally important to understanding this passage and having sound theology and sound doctrine about the unpardonable sin. It is speaking about those who, seeing the hand of God on the life of the Lord Jesus, instead of acknowledging it, actually attributed to Satan himself. So it is blasphemy but it is blasphemy against the Spirit, the Holy Spirit empowering Christ.

Thirdly, it is the sin of refusing Jesus as Messiah. As the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus, it was as if the finger of God was pointing to His Son. Just as when Jesus was baptized and the voice rang out from heaven, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," it is as if from that moment on the Holy Spirit of God followed Jesus around and the finger of heaven is pointing constantly and consistently to the fact that this Jesus is the Christ, that He is the Messiah, that He's the Son of God. To look at those credentials, which were staggering, it says they were amazed. To look at the credentials for Christ, to see that He's doing the very thing that the prophets of old foretold the Messiah would do. And then assign those credentials to hell and to Satan?

That is what's going on in this passage. That, my friends, is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of God.

Isaiah chapter 5 verse 20 describes not only what we're looking at this morning, but sadly, my friends, it describes the day and age in which we live when there will be people who will look at good things and they'll call them evil. They'll look at evil things and call them good. They'll look at sweet things and they'll call them bitter. They'll look at bitter things and call them sweet. That is our day and time. Just as it was in this day so it is in our day. Just as I said last week when Gov. Cuomo of New York said I will not sign any legislation until the bill that allows for abortion right up until the moment of birth comes across my desk and what did he do on Tuesday? The 46th anniversary of Roe vs. Wade he signs that bill into law and the state of New York erupts in celebration at least in part. What is that? I suggest to you it is a nation that has lost its soul. To celebrate? Yes. To grieve, to come alongside of women who are facing an incredibly difficult time perhaps in their life. All of that. But literally to celebrate the freedom to take the life of a baby at the ninth hour. This is what the religious leaders looked at in Jesus's day. The very credentials of heaven on display before them in the words, in teaching of our Lord and they assign those credentials to the pit of hell. Jesus says to do that is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit of God.

This brings us to the second question. Why is this sin unpardonable? Why is this sin unpardonable? Jesus said that blasphemy is pardonable. Here He says the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable. I want to answer that with two other questions. The first one is this: why is there greater guilt against the Holy Spirit than in sin against Jesus? Why wouldn't it have been enough to sin against Jesus and say this is the blasphemy against Christ? That's forgivable. Why? It's not because of any variation in deity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share absolutely equal in deity. So it has nothing to do with the level of deity within the Godhead. The key to understanding this whole passage is one word and it is the word "incarnation". It is the word "incarnation". God in the flesh.

Let me ask you. what did Jesus look like? What did Jesus look like? He looked like a human. He looked like a man. Even the disciples early on as they walked and talked with Jesus, they were scratching their heads all the time trying to figure out who

this man was. He looks just like we look. He sweats just like we sweat. He gets hungry just like we get hungry. Who is He that He is so incredibly different? I suggest to you that the sin against Jesus is blamable, but it is also pardonable because He is God in the flesh and the glory of God. There are only two times in the ministry of our Lord on this earth that the glory of God is not hidden. There are only two times in the ministry of Christ on this earth that the glory of God was unveiled. In the garden of Gethsemane. In that moment when He opened the eyes of those soldiers to the glory of God and they fell back dead. On the Mount of Transfiguration. Those were the only glimpses that humanity got beyond the veil of the flesh. To look at Jesus and to not conclude that okay He must be God, that was not easy. Blamable. Pardonable.

But the sin against the Spirit is different. The sin against the Spirit is largely related to the role of the Holy Spirit in our life. The Holy Spirit of God is the one who comes and in John 16 He's the one who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. He's the one who was bearing witness in the hearts and minds of these religious leaders. You're getting it wrong. You're getting it wrong. You're getting it wrong. and the witness of God's Spirit was pronounced. It was loud. It was clear. The convicting work of the Spirit was taking place. He was giving them understanding and the ability and the capacity to see the uniqueness of Jesus. In seeing that and the manifestation of the power of God in the power of the Holy Spirit of God is both blamable and unpardonable. The Holy Spirit is the one who opens our eyes and gives us understanding.

What then makes it unforgivable? What makes it unforgivable? It is the deliberate refusal of light. It reveals a hard and unrepentant heart. Someone has said it this way: "this sin precludes pardon because it precludes repentance." They have adopted a stance of hardness of heart. They have seen the light. They have looked at the light and then turned from the light. They have rejected the light. in Mark's Gospel and in the 3rd chapter when he talked about the fact that they were saying these things about Jesus, it's in the imperfect tense, which means they were continually saying these things about Jesus. This was not a one and done deal. They didn't see this one miracle of this man and say this has got to be of Satan. This was a condition of their heart. This was a revelation of the stance that they had taken against Christ. It was continuous. It was

ongoing. The very fact that they have an unrepentant heart is what makes this sin unforgivable. They were defiant and hostile toward Jesus.

Now if you want a little extra support as to whether this view could be what's going on here, what happens when you get to Matthew 13? What happens in Matthew 13 in terms of the teaching of Jesus? He turns to what? He turns to parables. Do you know why He turns to parables? He turns to parables because of the hardness of the heart of those He had been teaching for a year and a half. They consistently rejected the clear teaching of the truth. He said because you have a heart that precludes repentance, you will no longer see with clarity the light of the truth that I am proclaiming. He begins to teach in parables which hid the very truth of who He was from those who had hardened their hearts against Him.

This brings us to point 3. When is this sin committed? I believe this sin could only be committed when Jesus was alive and walking this earth and doing ministry on this earth while He was physically present. Given everything else that we have said. Given the fact that Matthew includes it, Mark includes it. Nobody else includes the story. Luke makes reference to it. It is never mentioned in Acts. It is never mentioned in any of the epistles. You read the whole rest of the New Testament and it is never brought up again. I believe it is because this particular sin, which is to hold a position of blasphemy against the clear witness of the Holy Spirit of God in the face of and in the light of and in the presence of the living Christ, is no longer possible today. This should I hope give some understanding and hopefully some freedom to someone who may be thinking I've done it. I've committed this sin. I don't know. I don't think there's a way back. Well, those who were physically alive when Jesus was on the earth, in my understanding of this passage, are those to whom Jesus said you have stepped across the line and committed the unpardonable sin.

What do we take away? There is a message here for every person this morning. There are two kinds of people here this morning. As a child of God by faith in Christ, you have God's promise. You have God's promise of forgiveness and acceptance. Period. Whatever it is that you have done, whatever sins you have committed, none of them surprised Jesus because He went to the cross for those sins that you have committed. If I'm doing my timeline properly, all of that was known when Jesus went to the cross. All

of your sins were future when Jesus went to the cross. You have not committed the unpardonable sin this morning. As a child of God by faith in Christ, His promise is one of forgiveness and acceptance. Paul was a blasphemer. He became the greatest missionary in the history the world. Peter denied publicly the Lord three times and he became for the first half of the book of Acts the greatest ambassador for the church of Jesus Christ. Go through all of the Scripture and the stories of the people of God are real and they are filled with failure. At the end of it all is the marvelous grace of God that embraces us and offers us forgiveness.

If you have not yet trusted Christ as your Savior, I say to you today is the day of salvation. You do not know what tomorrow holds. You do not know what the witness of God's Spirit in your life might be as He opens to you this morning the truth of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, that He came to this earth and He lived a perfect life. He willingly went to that cross for my sin and yours, and there He died in our place. All of our sin was put upon Him. The Bible says if we will believe, God gives to us the gift of eternal life. That is a forever and forever promise. Trust in Jesus alone. Not Jesus and what you can do, but Jesus alone for your salvation. God right now in this moment of time will give you the gift of eternal life.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we are so very thankful for the work of Your Spirit in our life. Lord, where would we be apart from that marvelous and amazing work of Your Spirit to open our eyes, to give us understanding of the gospel of Your grace, the truth that our sins can be forgiven. And so, Lord, we thank You for that. We thank You for the work and the witness of Your Spirit in drawing us to Yourself, in giving to us an understanding of what You have done, and with that the amazing gift of eternal life with You forever. We are forever grateful and thankful in Jesus's name, amen.