

INTRODUCTION

I had the privilege of preaching in Manila, Philippines two weeks ago and it was a great experience. While I was staying at the hotel in Manila I had some of my clothes washed, so the hotel laundry did them. I've been around the world and had laundry done in many cities, but when my clothes were returned in Manila, I was amazed because every single piece of clothing was folded into a perfect square, exactly the same size. It was beautiful—the folded edges were crisp, and there wasn't a wrinkle to be seen. In fact, I was so impressed I walked down to housekeeping and asked to meet the person who had folded my clothes so perfectly. I was introduced to a nice elderly lady and I said, "Thanks for the great job." So, folks I finally got to meet the famous Manila folder!

Today I'm going to answer the question, "What is the Unforgivable Sin?" When I served as pastor of a church in North Alabama during the early 1980s, there was an usher in our church named John. He was a sweet man who was always present in his regular spot to greet people and hand out bulletins. But John was a very troubled man. On several occasions I met with him and he began to weep as he told me that during World War II he had done something he thought was so evil that he was certain he had committed the unforgivable sin. I tried to help him by telling Him God could forgive every sin except the sin of unbelief, but that didn't change his mind. John never told me what he had done, but he was convinced he would never go to heaven. He attended church and served the Lord faithfully. His family was active in the church, and his children were talented singers, but he was tormented with the belief that he had committed the unpardonable sin and that he would never make it to heaven. I haven't heard from John for many years and based upon his age, chances are he has already died. From everything I knew about John and his life I think he's in heaven. But he missed out on so much peace and joy in this life because he was tormented by the belief that his sin was unforgivable.

John isn't the only person who has told me they fear they committed the unforgivable sin. I've had dozens of people tell me the same thing. Maybe you've even wondered if you've committed the unforgivable sin yourself. Let me start by saying what I tried to tell John: *If you are concerned that you have committed the unforgivable sin, the fact that you are burdened about it means you probably haven't!* I'll explain that more as we get into the message. During this series called "Parables and Miracles" we usually focus on a parable or a miracle, but in this passage, we have BOTH a miracle and a parable.

Matthew 12:22-32. "Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?' But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.' Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.' Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can

rob his house. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or the age to come.”

I often say there is a parable in every miracle and a miracle in every parable, so let's look first at the message we can glean from the miracle. Then we'll talk about the implications of the parable.

1. THE MIRACLE: JESUS CAN DELIVER THE MOST HOPELESS PERSON!

The Bible says, “They brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.” In previous messages dealing with demonic activity, I have pointed out that the phrase “demon possession” is actually a mistranslation. The term is just “demonized.” So a better translation would be “demonic influence.” And there are many levels of demonic influence. When you read that this blind and mute man was the victim of demonic influence, you immediately wonder, “Is every blindness or sickness the result of demonic activity?” The obvious answer is, “No.” This is one of the few times in the Gospels that demonic affliction is associated with physical impairment. There were many times Jesus healed sickness that wasn't related to demonic activity, and there were many times that Jesus delivered people from demonic influence where there weren't any symptoms of sickness.

There isn't any elaboration about this miracle, it simply says Jesus healed the blind and mute man so he could both talk and see. How tragic it must have been for this man living in darkness and unable to talk. His family and friends must have thought his case was hopeless, but no person is beyond hope when Jesus is present.

This miracle reminds me of the true story of Helen Keller. Being from Alabama, I have visited Helen Keller's childhood home in Tuscumbia, Alabama. As a young girl, Helen contracted scarlet fever and the illness left her blind, deaf, and mute. She grew up frustrated by her inability to communicate and often flew into uncontrollable rages. Her parents were ready to give up on her, but before they packed her off to an insane asylum, they made one final attempt. They hired a half-blind teacher named Anne Sullivan to see if she could do anything with this helpless, hopeless child.

In 1962 there was a movie made about this entitled “The Miracle Worker.” Anne Bancroft played Anne Sullivan and a young Patty Duke played Helen Keller. They both won Academy Awards for those roles. If you saw the movie you recall how frustrated and angry both Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller were about their inability to communicate. Finally, in the turning point of the story when Helen feels water on her hand and Anne repeatedly spells the word “water” using sign language into Helen's hand. And suddenly, it's as if a light goes on and Helen understands. The learning curve from that point moved at an accelerated pace until, within a short period of time, Helen Keller was able to communicate. Almost overnight she changed from a frantic, frustrated, girl into a composed, eager student. Helen Keller went on to become the first deaf/blind person to earn a college degree and before she died in 1968 she had written 12 books and traveled the world. In her own words she described this turning point in her life: “Once I

knew only darkness and stillness...my life was without past or future...but a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.”

That sounds like my testimony as well. Once I was living in spiritual darkness and a miracle worker came into my life. And with His nail-pierced hand He put His Word into my heart and replaced my emptiness with a kind of life beyond description.

You may feel that your life seems hopeless right now. Jesus is the real miracle worker and if you cry out to Him today, He can bring light where there was once darkness. Or perhaps you have someone in your family or circle of friendship whose life is out of control, hopeless. Don't stop praying for them. Don't stop sharing with them. Just remember, Jesus can deliver the most hopeless person.

When Jesus performed this miracle some witnesses wondered if He was the “Son of David” which was a title for the Messiah. But the enemies of Jesus, the Pharisees, accused Him of using the power of Beelzebub to cast out demons. The name “Beelzebub” literally means “Lord of the flies.” People observed that where there were dead animals, there were swarms of flies, so they equated flies with death and demons. In Jewish literature, Beelzebub was a chief demon, and even sometimes identified as Lucifer himself. But the point they were making was this: “Sure this guy has some powers, but He gets his power from Satan, not from God.” That was a very dangerous accusation and Jesus used it as an opportunity to give a short but powerful parable.

2. THE PARABLE: JESUS CAME TO DESTROY THE WORKS OF THE DEVIL

Jesus probably almost laughed in the faces of his accusers and said, “If I'm working for Satan, then it doesn't make any sense for me to repair the damage he caused to this man.” Then He said, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

It's a dangerous thing for religious people to say God's activities are actually from Satan. When I was in college I traveled around leading weekend youth revivals. I would play my 12-string guitar and lead songs before I preached. The songs I sang were pretty radical: They weren't in the hymnal. They were heavy metal songs like, “Get all excited, go tell everybody that Jesus Christ is Lord.” I can remember being in one church in North Alabama, and as I started leading the first song of the evening, an elderly man walked out shaking his head. It wasn't hard to miss him because there were only about 60 people there that night. He didn't come back in for the service, but afterwards we had a fellowship and he was there. He came over to me and his face was red. I don't remember his exact words, but he said something like, “I don't like you coming into my church and playing the devil's rock and roll music. And we don't allow guitars in our church. It's the devil's instrument.” I guess I was doubly devilish because I played a twelve-string guitar! I know that gentleman meant well, but he was doing the same thing those Pharisees were doing. He didn't like my music, but God was saving teenagers every weekend.

You may think that kind of accusation stayed in the 1970s, but don't believe it. I didn't go, but last week in the Oil Palace, Skillit and Toby Mac presented a concert. If some of you had been

there, you might have walked out saying it was the devil's music, but be careful because God is using those guys to reach a younger generation for Christ.

What can we learn from this miracle and this parable? Let me give you four take-away truths.

(1) Satan is strong, but Jesus is stronger!

In verse 29 Jesus delivers one of the shortest parables in the New Testament. He says, "How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house." In this mini-parable the strong man is Satan. His house is this world. Satan is called the god of this world. Jesus is the one who came into the world and He binds Satan and then steals his possessions. But Jesus wasn't really stealing anything from Satan. He was only reclaiming what Satan stole in the first place. Satan is the thief. Jesus said in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full."

In the Old Testament Jacob was a deceiver who stole both Esau's birthright and then his blessing from their father Isaac. That's what Satan has done for every member of the human race. He has stolen our Divine birthright and blessing. But Jesus came to reclaim what originally belonged to us—our right to be children of God and to receive God's Divine blessing.

Satan is strong, but don't worry because Jesus is stronger! The Bible says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 3:8, 4:4)

A few weeks ago we were blessed when Travis Cottrell sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." This hymn was originally written by the German pastor, Martin Luther, in 1528. Luther had an ongoing battle with Satan. It is recorded that he once was so angry with Satan's accusations that he hurled an ink bottle at him. Maybe you've never thought about it, but since our version rhymes in English, and the original hymn was written in German, we have never sung Luther's exact words. Our English version was translated by Fredrick Hedge in 1853. Let me share two of the stanzas in a literal translation of the Luther's words. It doesn't rhyme, but it captures Luther's thoughts: "A Mighty Fortress is our God, A great shield and weapon; He freely helps us in every adversity, That now concerns us. The old evil enemy, Now means serious business, Great power and much cunning, Are his cruel armor, On earth there is none like him." When I first sang that in English I thought it was talking about God, but it's about Satan. Here's the literal translation of the third verse: "And though the world is full of devils, Who want to completely devour us; But we don't fear too much, It should work out for us alright. The prince of this world, As angry as he is, Does nothing to us, Because he is judged, One little Word can fell him." Luther capitalized "Word" because it is the Word that became flesh, Jesus, who came to destroy the works of the devil.

Sure the devil is strong, but Someone much stronger came to bind Him and reclaim what was stolen. So don't be afraid of Satan because greater is He who is in you than he that is in the world!

(2) It's impossible to be neutral about Jesus

In verse 30 Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." Someone said this is the most narrow-minded statement Jesus ever made. That may be true in our current pluralistic, super-tolerant American religious mindset. It *does* sound rather intolerant, doesn't it? But that doesn't change the fact that it is *true*.

Jesus says you cannot straddle the fence when it comes to Him. You are either at this moment trusting Him or you are rejecting Him. The only thing you cannot do is to ignore Him.

It's also true that by our daily actions and words we are either gathering people toward Christ or we are scattering them away from Christ. There are no neutral actions when it comes to Christ. Are you attracting people to Jesus by your lifestyle and by your language? If you aren't then, you're pushing them away.

In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis states why it is impossible to be neutral about Jesus. He writes: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."

Some nations, like Switzerland declare that when it comes to war, they are neutral, but if they were ever under attack they would be forced to change their position. People who try to be neutral about Jesus remind me of the man in Kentucky during the Civil War who tried to be neutral. He didn't want to be identified with the Rebels, so he wore a dark blue shirt. And he didn't want to be identified with the Yankees so he wore grey trousers. As a result He got shot at from both sides! There is no neutrality when it comes to Christ.

(3) God graciously forgives every sin except one

Jesus said, I tell you every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven

When some people, like my friend John from Alabama, read that there is one sin that is unforgivable, they immediately tend to fear they have committed it. And that fear often prevents them from accepting God's forgiveness for a multitude of forgivable sins.

It reminds me of Adam and Eve in the Garden. God said, "Eat and enjoy the fruit of ALL the trees, but stay away from one." But instead of just enjoying those thousands of other good trees, they focused on the one bad one.

So, what is the unforgivable sin? Let me tell you what it is NOT. It is not murder. Moses was a murderer and he'll be in heaven. The unforgivable sin is not adultery. King David committed adultery and God forgave him. It's not divorce. The woman at the well had multiple divorces and she was forgiven. It is not suicide. Although the Catholic Church teaches that suicide is an unforgivable sin, you don't find it in the Bible. Suicide is self-murder and it is no different from homicide—both are forgivable. You may say, "Well, a person who commits suicide can't repent of that sin because they're dead." If that's your attitude, then you don't understand salvation. Once you are a Christian, you don't have to confess every single sin you commit in order to go to heaven. We confess our sins to stay in fellowship with God, but when you surrender your life to Christ, every past sin you've committed and every future sin you will ever commit is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ.

I've chosen not to put blanks on your outline, because if I listed ten sins that are forgivable someone would think, "Well, I've got a sin not on that list." If I told you a hundred sins that weren't the unforgivable sin, someone would have one *not* on the list. So just know and rejoice that EVERY sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is forgivable. Let's talk about this unforgivable sin.

(4) The only unforgivable sin is finally saying, "NO" to the Holy Spirit's call to repent and be saved

Jesus said: "When He [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." (John 16:8) Before you can ever be saved, you must experience a sense of guilt over your sinful condition. Jesus said this is the role of the Holy Spirit. It's not my job to make you feel guilty, that's the job of the Holy Spirit. Scary stories may bring fears and sad stories may bring tears, but only the Spirit of God can bring true conviction of sin.

The word blasphemy means to "speak against." So blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is when a person says, "No" to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. In that moment they are "speaking against" the Holy Spirit.

During high school I worked at a sawmill and my job was pulling lumber off the green chain. I would pull take the freshly-cut lumber that came directly from the saw and stack it according to size. This green lumber was rough and covered with splinters. I wore thick, canvas gloves to guard against splinters. But some of the men had worked there for years. They had developed thick calluses on their hands so that they didn't even use gloves. Shaking hands with them was like shaking hands with a lobster!

I believe some people have calluses on their hearts. They have heard the gospel message many times and have said, "No" so many times that they have hardened their hearts. They are in a dangerous condition where they can no longer sense the conviction of the Holy Spirit. In his excellent book, *The Holy Spirit*, Billy Graham gives the best definition of this sin I've ever read. He writes: "The unpardonable sin involves the total and irrevocable rejection of Jesus Christ. It is rejecting, completely and finally, the witness of the Holy Spirit, which declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who alone can save us from our sins. No one has committed the unpardonable

sin who continues to be under the disturbing, convicting, and drawing power of the Holy Spirit. But when a person has so resisted the Holy Spirit that He strives with him no more, then there is eternal danger." (*The Holy Spirit*, p. 124)

CONCLUSION

So, the only sin God won't forgive is terminal unbelief. And the reason God won't forgive that sin is because the person who commits it will never ask God to forgive them. If you are someone who considers yourself to be an unbeliever, I appeal to you to trust Jesus. Every time you say, "No" makes it easier to say, "No" the next time.

There is more to life than this life. One day we will face eternity. If you consider yourself an unbeliever, or you know someone who says they don't believe, I've written a little parable that might make sense to you.

Once there were unborn twins, Carrie and Larry, living inside their mother's womb. One day Carrie says to her twin brother, "Larry, I believe in life after birth, do you?" Larry replies, "No, I don't believe in life after birth. This is all there is and all there will ever be." Carrie sighs and says, "Not me. I've got to believe that there is another place—a place of light, and colors. A place where we will have the freedom to really live." Larry says, "Well, go ahead and believe if it makes you feel better, but I don't see any evidence of any other existence than this."

Later, Carrie says, "Larry, I know you won't believe this either, but I have decided that I believe in the existence of a Mother who gives us life." Larry scoffs and says, "What are you talking about? Have you ever seen a mother? No. I tell you, this place is all there is and we've just got to make the best we can of this existence. Why do you want more? I know it's dark and tight, but we've got everything we need right here."

Carrie replies, "But don't you feel those squeezes and can't you hear those muffled sounds? I know the squeezes are sometimes painful, but I think they're just getting us ready for another kind of living that's much more beautiful than this where we will see our mother face-to-face." Finally, Larry is so fed up he doesn't even answer; after all, the womb was all there was, and all there would ever be. And a few days later they were born—and Larry realized he was wrong. And for Carrie, it was even better than she imagined!

Do you believe in life after death, or do you believe this is all there is? Do you not believe because you don't see God? How can you NOT see God? But one day, we will learn there is life after death and for those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, it WILL be better than we can ever imagine!

OUTLINE

1. THE MIRACLE: JESUS CAN DELIVER THE MOST HOPELESS PERSON!
2. THE PARABLE: JESUS CAME TO DESTROY THE WORKS OF THE DEVIL

Take-away Truths:

(1) Satan is strong, but Jesus is stronger!

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." *1 John 3:8, 4:4*

(2) It's impossible to be neutral about Jesus

(3) God graciously forgives every sin except one.

The unforgivable sin is NOT...

(4) The only unforgivable sin is finally saying, "NO" to the Holy Spirit's call to repent and be saved

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes