

B Proper 5	The Unforgivable Sin Mark 3.20-30 by Tim Isbell	Preached 5/28/06
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Thesis: The only sin for which there is no forgiveness is looking at truth and calling it false long enough to eventually believe our lie, and looking grace in the face and calling it evil.

3 stories

Ruth Burrows story

In this English mystic's book, she tells the story of two contemplative nuns who were thoroughly mediocre. They left life outside to give themselves to prayer inside a monastery, but then they did not pray very much.

After a long time, the 1st nun was diagnosed with a terminal illness. This inspired her to try harder to develop a prayer life she had long neglected. But old habits die hard - she never really got her prayer life in order. Regardless, she died a happy death, asking God to forgive her for her weakness and knowing that he did.

The 2nd nun also died, but not so happily. Until the very end, she pretended to herself and others that she was not what she was – a weak human being.

It is not weakness that is the problem in our relationship with God, but rationalization, denial, lying to ourselves. These usually lead to the hardening of our hearts.

Mark 3.20-30: Jesus' warning about the unforgivable sin

Context

Jesus went into a synagogue on Sabbath and ended up healing a man with a deformed hand. Religious leaders did not rejoice and praise Jesus about this. Instead, they were angry saying that Jesus broke the religious law by healing on Sabbath. They began to plot to kill Jesus.

Large crowds began following Jesus, who was healing all kinds of illnesses. He went to a lake and told disciples to get a boat ready in case he gets crowded off the beach. Some people filled with evil spirits saw Jesus, and they fell in front of him shrieking "You are the Son of God!" even though Jesus told the spirits to stop revealing his identity.

That brings us to today's text: read Mark 3.20-30.

People often are shocked by Jesus' statement that there is one unforgivable sin. Christians understand this as some sort of sin against the Holy Spirit.

In our scripture, Jesus had just cast out an evil spirit in the presence of religious leaders.

It wasn't the 1st time.

The prevailing theology was that only God can do that, but they are not ready to see the truth that Jesus is God come in human form.

Instead of admitting what their theology said must be true, they chose to rationalize that Jesus must be evil himself to have the authority to cast out another evil spirit.

Jesus pulls them aside and tries to reason with them, but they stick with their rationalization.

Ronald Rolheiser paraphrases Jesus' talk with them like this: (from *The Holy Longing*, p227).

Be careful not to lie, not to distort the truth, because the real danger is that, by lying, you begin to distort and warp your own hearts. If you lie to yourself long enough, eventually you will lose sight of the truth and believe the lie and become unable any longer to tell the difference between truth and lies. What becomes unforgivable about that is not that God does not want to forgive, but that you no longer want to be forgiven. God easily forgives all of your weaknesses and will always forgive anyone who wants to be forgiven, but you can so warp your own conscience that you see God's truth and forgiveness itself as a lie, and see your own lie as truth and forgiveness. That is the only sin that truly puts us outside of God's mercy, not because God refuses to extend mercy further but because you can look mercy in the eye and call it a lie.

Scholars agree that Jesus' admonition not to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is a warning against sustained dishonesty and rationalization.

John 9

The Bible tells another story that illustrates this concept from the opposite perspective. It's the story of the man born blind in John 9.

*(This perspective also comes from Ronald Rolheiser's *The Holy Longing*, p226-228.)*

One day Jesus is walking along and his disciples see a man born blind. They ask Jesus, "Why is this man blind? Was it his sins or his parents?" Jesus replies, "Neither, it was so the power of God could be seen in him."

(Aside) – Were you born with a problem like this man? Or did something happen in your past that was out of your control but which affects you still today? Most likely it is something that God allowed in your life so that his power could be seen in you.

Anyway, Jesus goes to the blind man, spits on the ground (the blind man probably had heard people spit on the ground in front of him before), then Jesus makes mud of the spit and dirt and puts it on the man's eyes. Jesus tells him to go wash in the nearby pool. He does, and sees for the very first time!

Neighbors and others who weren't present ask the man, "What happened?" In simple truthfulness, the man says, "A man they called Jesus, spit on the ground ..."

They take the man to the religious leaders who ask him what happened to give him sight. He gives the same simple, truthful explanation. The religious leaders try to discount the story but the man holds his ground, refusing to dilute the truth. He has to

repeat the core of his story several times.

Finally, the religious leaders insult him, call him stupid, a sinner, and tell him that he has no business contradicting them. The (no longer blind) man absorbs their accusations while humbly repeating the truth as he knows it, even though it means he is thrown out of the synagogue. He simply says "I was born blind. A man called Jesus gave me sight. And so far as I can tell this Jesus must be from God because who else could do such a thing?"

In this story, the man does something that is the opposite of the sin against the Holy Spirit. John the gospel writer presents him as not particularly bright, not religiously keen, dis-privileged in terms of his opportunity to recognize the messiah if he should show up. But at the end of the story, this man becomes an apprentice of Jesus through one, single virtue: he refuses to lie.

In his honesty, he is led to God.

Okay, let's come at this from a different perspective.

A Hepatitis C advertisement at a bus stop

There are illnesses that degrade our lives and the lives of people around us, but we won't die from them:

- Blindness
- Arthritis
- Retinitis pigmentosa
- Deafness
- Osteoporosis
- Alzheimer's
- Herniated disk, and so on.

And there are illnesses that we will die from, such as Hep C. It destroys our liver, and that leads to death.

There are sins that degrade our lives and the lives of people around us, but they might not keep us out of heaven. They're also in the category of sins of rationalization or lying to ourselves and others. Some of us tell ourselves the lie that...

- A past injustice justifies our unforgiving spirit.
- Our prejudice against a group is justified because of some historic events of that group.
- We have good reason to freeze out our spouse, even though we promised God we'd love and cherish her/him until death do us part.
- Our quarrelsome spirit about something is justified because we are right.
- Our cynicism and sarcasm are justified because the world is so messed up.
- Our divorce is not for us; it's for our kids.

These sins degrade our lives and the lives of people around us, but in themselves, they may not keep us out of heaven.

But there are sins that will keep us out of heaven.

- One is the sin of looking at the claims of Jesus, like that we are guilty of sin, and

- rejecting his claim as true.
- Another is deciding not to ask Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and gratefully receiving his forgiveness.
- Another is to reject his direction for living, stubbornly continuing to trust our own plans above his.

These sins will keep us out of heaven, but they don't need to. They are all forgivable if we will look Jesus in the face and trust him with the center of our life, he will give us eternal life. And he will give us the Holy Spirit to transform the list of other sins that degrade our lives. He will create in us a life that brings honor to himself. That is a beautiful life.

The only unforgivable sin happens when we...

Lie to ourselves and distort the truth so long that we lose any sense of the Creator's truth and believe the lies that we've been fed, or concocted on our own. When we shut God that far from our life, we don't become wise – we become unable any longer to tell the difference between truth and lies. God still wants to forgive, but we no longer want to be forgiven by the only one who can forgive.

I doubt that anyone here is that far gone into their own self-worship, though some may be on the road to there.

Everyone here is only 1 prayer away from launching the New Life in Jesus.

Many here have prayed a prayer like this before. I have.

We who have prayed this way before are comfortable reaffirming it again - sort of like reaffirming our wedding vows.

So I want to offer you a chance to pray such a prayer this morning as the close to the message.

If you are an apprentice to Jesus, please read it aloud with me.

If you want to become an apprentice to Jesus, read it today for the first time.

Take a few moments and read it first to yourself, and then decide if you will make this prayer your prayer this morning, read it along with the rest of us.

Encourage people to tell/email me if you have prayed this today.

Other resources:
Click on the link for the Google Slides . (Similar to PowerPoint)
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