

Calloused by Unrepentance (12:22-37)

Good morning everyone! My name is Jeff and I am one of the pastors here at City Church. What I do for our church family largely centers on things that happen outside of Sunday Gatherings, things like LifeGroups, classes like our City Church class or LifeGroup Basics, pastoral care, and finances. So because of that, I don't typically get the opportunity to teach from the stage on Sundays so I am super excited to be here.

So today's passage contains Jesus' teaching on what people have called 'the unpardonable or unforgivable sin'. Now, back in January, Kent asked me if I could teach Matthew 12:22-37, without checking the passage I said, absolutely, would love to teach on Sundays since like I mentioned before, I don't get many opportunities to do so. I've known Kent for a long time now and it is amazing just how often I forget how smart and sneaky that man is. Because the passage that is Matthew 12:22-37 is one of those passages that are slightly terrifying and confusing. It is in fact in Jeff's top 5 most confusing bible passages, closely followed by passages on circumcision.

In fact, I remember when I was a kid growing up in the church, coming across this passage and for months I was obsessing, OMG did I commit this unforgivable sin, constantly asking my mom if I was going to hell, which honestly annoyed the.... out of her. So Kent gave me a passage for this morning that 1: is slightly terrifying and confusing, 2: was absolutely terrifying and confusing in my personal experience. So when Kent gave me this passage to teach on, I wasn't sure if Kent just really thinks highly of me as a teacher or just thought it might be fun to watch me suffer. So we'll find out here in the next thirty minutes or so!

With that being said, let's pray and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to us this morning.

In my opinion, the first thing you should do when you come across a confusing passage in the Scriptures is look at its context. Context matters, *a lot*. As we've said before, the bible is a story, not an encyclopedia—you tracking with me? When you read an encyclopedia, it doesn't really matter what's ahead of the thing you're reading or behind it (that's an entirely different topic—but in the bible, what's before and after a verse often makes a *big* difference. So for example, did you know in the bible, it actually says

**"There is no God."
- Psalm 14:1**

I mean that's a pretty big statement for followers of Jesus right? The bible being the word

of God actually says “There is no God.” This should lead to a lot of us questioning everything. This could mean everything followers of Jesus built their life upon is all for nothing. But if you read the sentence right before it, it says:

*The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”
- Psalm 14:1*

That changes things doesn't it? So that is just taking one sentence out of one verse out of context. Imagine if you do that with multiple verses. My point is that context matters. And until we understand the context of this passage we're looking at, the situation it describes, and the people Jesus is talking to, our understanding of the bit about the unforgivable sin is gonna be kinda goofy. Make sense?

So let's take a look at some of this context before we get into the difficult verses at the end. Let's start with v. 22:

[22] 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. [23] All the people were astonished and said, “Could 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 the crowds of people who see Jesus heal this guy are amazed, and because they're amazed, they ask the question that Jesus' miracles are supposed to make them ask: “*Could this be the Son of David?*” That's Jewish speak for “Could this be the long awaited messiah, the king that is going to deliver us and set us free once and for all.” Jesus did miracles, in part, because he wanted people to see who he was. And the people start to ask the question: who *is this guy?*

So the crowds are stoked that Jesus just did this, but the Pharisees waste no time pooping on everybody's party: “*It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, (that's Jewish speak for Satan, not Beetlejuice's cousin) that this fellow drives out demons.*” Alright. Do any of you guys have that friend that whenever everybody's excited about something, they like to tell you everything wrong with what you're excited about? *Isn't that annoying? Like, “thanks Gerald.” We all have a Gerald, don't we? And if you are sitting here thinking you don't know anyone like Gerald, I have bad news for you.* So the Pharisees are the Gerald: “hey guys, everybody just calm down for a second—the only reason Jesus was able to do this miracle is because he's on Team Satan.”

The Pharisees, who are the religious ruling elite that feels threatened by Jesus, know they can not refute the validity of Jesus' miracles. So they can now only attack the **source** and **power** of it. So they start attributing the things he's doing by the power of God, to the power of Satan.

But this isn't a very well-thought-out strategy, which Jesus is about to expose. So what Jesus does next, is he kind of dismantles what the Pharisees just said by confronting their faulty logic. And Jesus does it twice. First in v.25

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?"

Jesus quotes Abraham Lincoln "A house divided against itself, cannot stand." Or maybe it was the other way around. Jesus is stating the simple truth if he is on team Satan, casting demons out is not exactly a winning strategy. That's like saying 'Apple's new strategy for selling more phones is to convince everybody that they make crappy phones.' Ummmm I don't think that's a great strategy actually. He goes onto v.29 to further unpack this.

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.

Jesus basically said, if you are going to rob everyone's beloved action hero/wrestler the Rock Dwayne Johnson's house, you better have a plan to deal with the Rock himself. And it needs to be a really good plan or else you're gonna get the People's elbow to the face. Or more realistically for our local East TN context, if you are gonna rob a home anywhere in this area, you better know where the homeowner keeps their shotguns. Jesus is saying here, how can I cast out demons from people unless I have some sort of mastery or authority over Satan?

But in reality, Jesus is just tearing down the surface level push backs so that he can get to the real issue. In v. 28 he goes after the real problem at the heart of the Pharisee's dismissal of him, and this is where I want us to zero in:

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

Jesus says "here's the real reason you're attributing what I'm doing to Satan." Because you know the options are either 1) I'm doing this by the power of Satan and you can dismiss my authority, or 2) I'm doing this by the Spirit of God and you have to accept my authority—you have to accept that I am who I say I am. And you don't like the implications of #2.

Now let's pause here real quick and talk about the Holy Spirit, since Jesus brought it up. The bible talks about a lot of different things the Spirit does, but the two things I want us

to highlight for our purposes for this morning are that he: “Convicts us of sin” and second, “Points us to Jesus”. One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to bring conviction of sin and being reminded of the good news of the gospel and what Jesus accomplished on the cross for us. To start we are going to focus on the first part: the Holy Spirit bringing conviction of sin. In John 16, Jesus is talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit, and he says that one thing the Spirit will do is he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. So what Jesus wants us to see is that when you and I feel conviction over sin, that happens *via* the Holy Spirit. That’s the Holy Spirit speaking that conviction to us. I know usually we say stuff like “God has been convicting me,” or “Jesus has been convicting me…” and it’s not wrong per se to say it like that, but to be the utmost technical, the *Holy Spirit* is the one who speaks conviction into our conscience.

Which means it’s our attentiveness *to* the Spirit that is what leads us to repent of our sin, and put our trust in Jesus—not just one time when we become a Christian—but in our everyday lives as Christians. **And put inversely, that means that our *inattentiveness and unwillingness to listen to the Spirit is what hardens our hearts towards our own sin. That make sense?*** If you are attentive to the Holy Spirit, you can repent and walk in freedom. If you *aren’t* attentive to the Spirit, you have hardened your heart. You have grown calloused to the voice of the Holy Spirit. You effectively pour cement around your heart when it comes to hearing from the Spirit and repenting of sin. **Make sense? Need a head nod.**

And it’s with that groundwork laid, that Jesus drops the next two lines—the ones we’ve all been waiting for—to the Pharisees:

[31] *And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. [32] 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 in the age to come.*

Jesus says to the Pharisees, effectively, “there is a way to so harden your heart towards the reality of your sin that you box yourself out of repentance.” There is a way to train yourself to drown out the voice of conviction in your life, to grow accustomed to hearing the Holy Spirit speak and doing nothing in response, that you effectively make yourself immune to the Holy Spirit’s conviction.

And the Pharisees have so trained themselves to do this that they consider it acceptable to attribute the work of the Spirit to the work of Satan—and Jesus is saying to them “you’re dangerously close to not being able to discern the work of the Spirit at all.” You’ve

so convinced yourself of your own self-righteousness, your own self-sufficiency—that you have no hesitation about attributing the work of God to the work of his enemy.

A theologian puts it this way:

“Once you convince yourself that the last remaining bottle of water is poison, you condemn yourself to die of thirst.” - NT Wright

This is effectively what the Pharisees had done. God sent them his very own son to call them to repent, and they were attributing the work of God’s Spirit to Satan so they could justify drowning him out. And Jesus is saying that once you’ve decided to do *that*, you’ve effectively condemned yourself.

So many years ago, I lived basically right next to a fire station and a hospital. For years, I had fire trucks and ambulances blasting their sirens in my ear hole. Now what’s interesting is, I had no idea so much of that was going on while I lived there. At first, it was really annoying to hear sirens all the time, but eventually I think I just got used to it. I got to where I barely even noticed it because sirens were so much a part of my everyday life. To where eventually, what would happen is that I would be driving somewhere, and an ambulance or fire truck would be somewhere near me, but it was like I didn’t notice it because it was so naturally a part of the soundtrack of my life already. I no longer heard sirens for what they were, because I was so used to them. It wasn’t until I moved to a normal quiet, peaceful neighborhood where you can hear birds sing that I realized all those years I couldn’t hear or I have simply turned out the sirens. **My fear is that some of y’all have done the exact same thing but with the voice of the Holy Spirit. You have grown so used to hearing conviction and doing nothing in response, that you can no longer hear him at all.**

Because what Jesus is essentially saying is that our actions have consequences. When you train yourself, day after day, year after year, decade after decade—to hear the Spirit drawing you towards repentance and train yourself to deny that prompting, eventually it becomes extremely difficult to hear that voice speak at all. Some of you are confused because everytime you try to pray or read the bible, it just feels cold and dry to you. And that could be for any number of different reasons. But one of them could be this: it could be that you’ve so trained yourself to drown out the voice of the Spirit, that you can’t even really hear him speaking anymore.

Now, I want us all to breathe for a second. That’s heavy stuff, right? And you might be thinking to yourself, “but where’s grace in all this? Doesn’t grace mean that God can forgive anybody?” And the answer is yes, God can forgive anybody. **But you have to**

understand that the road that grace travels down is Holy Spirit-spoken conviction. And if you've decided that voice isn't worth listening to, –there's no way for grace to get through to you.

Here's the way David Platt says it in his commentary on the book of Matthew:

Blasphemy against the Spirit of God is unforgivable, because the avenue to forgiveness is rejected.

So hear me out, God can and will forgive you and anyone else he chooses to. But if you have invented a version of grace that purposely excludes your repentance, what you have is a counterfeit version of grace.

Romans 2:4 puts it this way:

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

– Romans 2:4

Here's what Paul just said: the **fruit** of God's forgiveness and kindness and patience is that it leads us to repent. So if you are using 'God will forgive me' as a justification for not **repenting**, you are interacting with something **other than** God. Because that's not how it works.

So let me just get real specific for a few minutes. Because our church has a ton of young people and a lot of them getting engaged and married, I do a lot of premarital counseling. And this one time I was doing premarital counseling back in South Carolina, and we hit a little bit of a snag. In the part where we discuss sin and what sin is, the topic of sexual sin came up. And the couple was really honest with me, which I always appreciate, and they told me they were currently sleeping together as an engaged couple. So I did what I typically do, where I unpack God's picture of what human sexuality is and helped them think through what repentance looks like. So far, so good. But then I asked if they felt good about the plan for repenting of their sexual sin we had talked about, and the guy said "well, it's complicated." I thought *no, it's really not, but I didn't say that*, I said "go on?" And he started to explain: "Well, it's complicated because even though we know intellectually that what we're doing is wrong and we know the bible says it's wrong and know that our friends and people who love us tell us it's wrong, we just don't *feel* like it's wrong." They had so trained themselves, over years, to silence and drown out the Holy Spirit's voice of conviction—that they were unable to even hear it convicting them anymore.

And that's my fear for some of you guys too—that you've spent so many years hearing the Spirit's conviction and just saying "nah, I'm fine," "no that's okay," "no, I like him too much," "no, I like her too much," "no I enjoy my sin too much," "no, I deserve to be happy and therefore do whatever I want," "no, it is too difficult to change," "I'll do it just one more time," that you are on your way to being unable to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit entirely.

Now for some of you, it may not be that you're drowning out the **convicting** voice of the Spirit. You're drowning out the **life-giving** voice of the Spirit. The lies you believe yourself are 'I'm worthless, I'm unlovable, I'm beyond hope.' And the Spirit is trying to speak to you 'no you're not. You're a beloved son or daughter, you have infinite worth,' and you're going "yeah but no." You've so consistently drowned out the truth about you with lies about you that you can no longer hear the truth.

There is a voice calling out to you "turn from your sin, and turn towards where life is found." The voice telling you that the life found in Jesus is better than life wherever you're chasing it. The voice telling you that whatever He calls you to give up for his sake and the gospel, it's worth it. The voice reminding you that Jesus' blood was poured out for you, his body was broken for you—so that you could know for sure that your sin has been forgiven. But that voice only helps if you listen. If you listen and respond.

Back earlier in the sermon I mentioned there are 2 things that I want us to focus this morning on what the Holy Spirit does. The first one convicts us of sin and the second one points us to Jesus.

Now this is where it absolutely breaks my heart when I see people hardened their hearts to the Holy Spirit and drowning out his voice. Not only are they ignoring the warning of the Holy Spirit trying to speak to them of the destruction that sin brings, they have also drowned out the good news and hope of Jesus. They have hardened their hearts to Jesus' **love** for them. The love that went to the cross to redeem them from their sin. They have drowned out the voice that reminds them of all of that. The voice that says "You are a son or daughter of God. You are clean, whole, unblemished, worthy, desired and wanted. The voice that whispers "You are already perfectly loved by the God of the universe." "You no longer need to search for things to give you worth and value. The need to be fully known and fully accepted, loved, is already given to you because everything Jesus has accomplished on the cross for you."

Those voices are now replaced with "you need more," "you are not enough," "you will always be alone," "you have to have this to be whole," and "God is withholding joy from

you.” It breaks my heart because when you drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit, it leaves you in an incredibly dark and lonely place. And Jesus is here offering you freedom, hope, and life.

Because the unbelievably wonderful thing about Jesus is that he doesn't stop speaking even when we've stopped listening. I mean look at this story: Jesus walks right up to the Pharisees, who he's saying are guilty of this particular sin and calls them on it. Jesus isn't doing that just for his own peace of mind—he's doing it because he wants them to listen. And maybe for you today, God has you here for this particular Sunday because he wants you to listen too. **If you're hearing this right now and you're thinking that some of it sounds like what you're doing, don't hear it and do nothing about it one more time.**

A lot of people (and a lot of pastors) throw in a caveat with the unpardonable sin that goes something like: “if you're nervous about committing the unpardonable sin, you definitely haven't committed it.” And while I get that sentiment, I'd like to tweak it a little. **I'd put it this way: if you're nervous about committing the unpardonable sin, repent. You can train yourself to listen to the Holy Spirit just like you can train yourself to drown it out. Repent. Listen to the Spirit's loving conviction, and respond to it. If you hear the voice of the Spirit and respond to it by repenting and trusting, then you know for a fact you haven't committed the unforgivable sin. It's that simple.**

Let's continue the passage, starting at Verse 33.

33 “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Jesus is essentially saying the evil in the heart of the Pharisees is so full where it overflowed into their words against Jesus. That they have hardened their heart so much, it is clearly displayed through their words against Jesus. That their words weren't because of a misunderstanding of who Jesus is, or a slip of a tongue, it's out of the condition of their heart. This isn't a one time thing the Pharisees have said something against the Holy Spirit, it's a heart posture they have towards the Holy Spirit. They have refused to repent and listen to the voice of the Spirit.

So where are you today with Jesus? Do you hear the voice of his Spirit speaking into your life either through conviction of sin or being pointed to the good news of Jesus? Or are you more familiar with the voices I have mentioned earlier like “nah, I’m fine,” “no that’s okay,” “no, I like him too much,” “no, I like her too much,” “no I enjoy my sin too much,” “no, I deserve to happy and therefore do whatever I want,” My plea to you this morning is to repent. Hear the voice of the Holy Spirit again. Please.

So a couple thoughts as we close. A couple thoughts on how to hear (and respond to) the voice of the Spirit.

- **Personal Time.** The Holy Spirit uses several different avenues to speak to us. He speaks through us reading the Scriptures, he speaks through prayer. If you fill up your life with so many things and never pause or slow down enough to do these things, you will have a hard time hearing the voice of the Spirit. I get it, we are all very busy people, which means all the more important that we actually block out time for the most important voice in our lives so we can listen. **And danger is that we replace that with the inner voice in our heads saying “it’s ok, do whatever it makes you happy” and drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit, the voice pleading with us that what we are chasing will only lead to more pain and suffering. This shadow we are chasing will only lead to heartbreak and disappointment.** If you are in the habit of checking every text and social media app before you get time in the Scriptures in the morning, you are stacking the odds against yourself in terms of hearing from God. If you keep your phone right next to you so you can answer every text and interruption, same thing. Block out time where you are not distracted, and be in the bible, or pray, or listen to worship music that speaks truth. Spend some undivided time to hear from God via the Spirit.
- **Holy Spirit Filled Community.** Hebrews 3:13 says “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” You need people in your life who know Jesus and know you to speak by the Holy Spirit, into your life. And by that I don’t just mean a bible study or an accountability group—those things are great. But I mean a group of people who know your tendencies, who know the things you’re tempted to run to, that can be a constant voice into your life. People that don’t let you just get away with stuff. **Instead we let people who don’t know us well and only know us from a distance speak into our lives and drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit. That we drown out the voice of people who follow Jesus that knows us best. That we cherry pick those people who are fans of us who will never speak hard truths to us, that we listen to them and drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit. That we let voices of people who do not know Jesus speak over the voice of the Holy Spirit.** If your inclination everytime community engages you on something or makes you uncomfortable is to decide to avoid them or not listen—or worse, to say they are

“unsafe people” and write them off—you are training yourself to drown out the voice of the Spirit through them. If you don’t have that type of community in your life, it will be so easy to float through your life silencing the voice of the Spirit, or worse—thinking you’re hearing the voice of the Spirit and it’s actually just your own preferences and tendencies. You need people in your life who can help you test what the Spirit is saying and hold you accountable for actually listening and responding. If you’ve already got that kind of community, great. Make sure you’re actually letting them into your life so they can be helpful. If you don’t have that type of community, I would love to invite you to be a part of one of our LifeGroups. That is one of the biggest purposes our LifeGroups serve in each of our lives in our church family.

- **Practice listening in the small things.** One thing I’ve noticed is that we don’t just wake up one day and all of a sudden listen and obey the Spirit in everything we do. That’s not how it works. We drift there over time. It starts with the Spirit telling us it would be good to get up a little earlier and spend time in the Scriptures, prompting us to pray on our drive or walk to class or work, prompting you to initiate a relationship with that person in your life that doesn’t seem to know anybody—it starts with him telling us to take little steps of obedience. And over time, when we practice listening and responding to the small things, it becomes easier to obey him in the big things. Not *easy*, but *easier*. When he’s telling you that a dating relationship is a bad idea and you need to get out of it, when he tells you to turn down a job that prevents you to be around God’s people or ability to tell other people about Jesus—all of a sudden it makes a little more sense, it’s a little more natural to obey in the big things, because you’ve practiced obeying in the small things. Instead, practice listening and responding to the little things, so that when the big things come, the voice of conviction will be crystal clear.

To wrap up: The God of the universe desires to speak to you through his Spirit, so position yourself where you can listen to it, don’t run from it, don’t harden your heart against it, it is the avenue of grace and forgiveness Jesus is offering you. Let’s pray.

Reflection

Have you been drowning the voice of the Holy Spirit?

Are there convictions the Holy Spirit is speaking to you?

Are there life-giving encouragement the Holy Spirit is speaking to you?