

Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson  
February 28th, 1982  
"The Unforgiveable Sin"  
Mark 3:20-30

"THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN"

In the passage which I read for our scripture lesson we see three attitudes towards Jesus. We see the attitude of the crowd. We've seen that over the last several weeks the crowds were constantly flocking to Jesus, from all over the place. But here for the first time, we also see the attitude of his family, the family of Jesus.

Perhaps, Mary, perhaps James and some of his other relatives were there. And they were saying out of his mind - Jesus was out of his mind. He's flipped out. He's crazy. I don't know exactly why they would say that. It may have been that they were aware of the trouble that he was getting into with the Scribes and the Pharisees and they were actually plotting his death, and they must have thought ~~him crazy if he continued on in his ministry as he had in the past.~~ He ought to use more diplomacy, more tact. I'm not exactly sure what was behind that. But they came there to take custody of him. They're saying he's crazy.

Then there is the attitude of the scribes, the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem. They were saying he is possessed by Beelz<sup>a</sup>bub. Isn't that a beautiful word - beelzabub. Beelzabub was the name of a pagan god, the god of Ekron who was no god at all since there's only one God. But many people worshipped Belzabub. And the name means lord of the pies. And the Jew<sup>x</sup> sometimes left off the final letter in that word, and instead of putting a b there, putting an l there

needed to say these things out of a deep rooted hostility towards someone who challenged their orthodoxy, their tradition, their authority. And we see that early in the second chapter of Mark where very early in the ministry of Jesus the scribes and pharisees were very upset with Jesus and had almost at that early point in the ministry not even listened to him, turned him off and decided to destroy him.

It's one thing to think Jesus is crazy. But it's quite another to attribute to Satan, his power to release people from the rule of Satan. And it was this last attitude that concerned Jesus the most. He knew that the crowd were fickle and were interested mostly in seeing miracles happen. He could understand and even sympathize perhaps with his family thinking he was crazy. But what the teachers of the law were saying greatly disturbed him because he felt that what they were saying was not so much a criticism of himself but a criticism of the holy spirit of God. So Jesus called them to stand before him and spoke to them in parables and this is the first time that Jesus used parables in his ministry, according to Mark. And he asks how can Satan drive out Satan. Now these men were not denying that Jesus cast out demons. They were not like so many people today who simply do not believe in demons. They believed in them and they believed that Jesus cast out demons. Their concern was by what authority he was doing this. And in responding to them, Jesus first used reason in the form of illustrations to show how irrational it was to charge him with being in league with Satan. A kingdom or household will fall if it's divided against itself. In other words,

Satan wants to possess man's bodies and souls. Certainly no one in league with Satan would rob Satan of the souls and bodies of men and women, would they? Would somebody in league with Satan, rob Satan of his possessions? The souls and bodies of men and women.

So first you reason with them, point out how irrational their accusations were. Second, Jesus offered an explanation as to what he was doing. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had met men, women and children who were demon possessed. Possessed by Satan. What is a possession. A possession is something that someone owns. Satan owned them, in a sense. And whenever he met these men, women and children. Whenever he met them, he would rob Satan of his possessions. He would cast out the demons. Now what this means, Jesus explains, is that Jesus had bound Satan. No one, he said, can 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. Jesus was robbing Satan of his possessions when he cast out demons. And if Jesus was robbing Satan of his possessions, it was a sign that Satan himself was bound by Jesus. Do you get the explanation that Jesus was giving?

This is one of the most joyful notes in the good news of the nearness of the kingdom of God. Satan is bound - Satan, that strong man, is bound by Jesus.

We have something similar in Luke when Jesus rejoices at the news that is brought back to him by the 72 disciples which he had sent out to preach and to cast out demons and to heal. And these 72 people came back, these 72 disciples came back rejoicing and they said, Even the demons are cast out by the authority of the preached word. And it said that Jesus rejoiced in his spirit. And he said, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

And just about the same time that Mark was writing his gospel,

only through healings and through demon expulsions in the days of Jesus, but continue to take place through a mighty missionary program which has reached nearly every nation this day. Since the day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the holy spirit on the fledgling church, Satan has no longer been able to deceive the nations on the same scale that he had deceived them in the time of the Old Testament church. The good news of the kingdom is that Jesus has Satan on the run. Already his realm is being broken down and a glorious kingdom which had existed for ages is now arising in a marvelously new form and Satan can do nothing to prevent Christ's ultimate and final victory.

This is a note so often sadly lacking in evangelical churches. And yet its one of the most joyful notes in the preaching and the teaching of the early church. That note rings out through so much of the New Testament that Christ has defeated the powers of Satan, the powers of hell. What an incentive for us to evangelism and to missions if we would believe the good news and the kingdom of Satan has been defeated and the kingdom of God is near. These are days of harvest, not of retrenchment. And such days, churches should seriously examine themselves if they're not growing and if they're not reaching out to take possession of those who Satan is no longer able to keep under his power. These are days of harvest and whenever a man or woman or child is converted to Christ, Satan is robbed of his possessions. Jesus has bound Satan. That is the explanation that Jesus gave to the teachers of the law in our scripture lessons. Jesus offered this explanation to the teachers of the law for their serious consideration. Jesus as much as said, you see how unreasonable it is to accuse me of being in league with Satan. Will you not consider before its too late for you, that what I'm doing is a sign that the kingdom of God is at hand and that the new age has already

begun, has already broken into this old world of ours and that I, Christ Jesus, far from being in league with Satan have bound him and am robbing him. Won't you believe me. Won't you at least consider it.

So Jesus first reasoned with them. Secondly, he explained to them what he was doing and thirdly, Jesus warned them. He warned them of the dangers they were in of blaspheming or speaking evil of the Holy Spirit. He said, I tell you the truth. All the sins and blasphemies ~~and speaking~~ ~~of men~~ will be forgiven. But whoever blasphems against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. He is guilty of an eternal sin.

It's one thing for Jesus relatives to think he's crazy. And we too, may have questions and doubts about Jesus. We may be agnostic to some degree, not knowing what to believe about Jesus, not understanding and yet not hostile to Jesus. Yet ~~struggling~~ in our own way to ~~try~~ try to learn and find out more about Jesus. Responding to the working of the spirit in our heart. But we are in great danger when we have made up our minds against Jesus and we steadfastly refuse to attribute to him and to the work of the spirit those things which are happening in the world today which are obviously the work of the spirit, particularly when men and women are converted to Christ. We're in great danger when we attribute the work of Christ in robbing Satan of his possessions, to the work of Satan. And Mark included these words of Jesus as a warning to all future generations. Beware of sinning against the Holy Ghost. Beware of that unforgiveable sin.

Now I believe that that warning was there for us, too, to warn us. My pastor when I was in high school, on preaching on this passage, used an illustration which has always stuck with me. He said the person who constantly resists the Holy Spirit, knowing that it is really the Holy Spirit at work in his heart, wooing him to Christ, is like a man or a woman who goes out on the river above Niagara Falls, and he rows out there

and he coasts with the current for awhile. And then all of a sudden he gets upset because he realizes that he is getting near to Niagara Falls so he starts rowing and rowing and rowing and he rows back to shore. And he thought that's really kind of exhilarating. I know it's dangerous to do but it is kind of exhilarating. It's good exercise and it's fun. The next day he goes out there and he floats with the current again and he goes a little further and he has to row and row and row a little harder to get back to shore but he makes it. But then one day he gets to the point of no return and the current is so swift and quick that no matter how fast he rows he can't get out of that current and he's swept over the falls to his own destruction. And I remember very clearly my pastor saying to the congregation. Beware. Don't continue to ignore and to turn off the promptings of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is bearing witness to you of the work of Christ, wooing you to him, inviting you to Christ and commanding you to repent and believe. It's a solemn warning. Now through the ages perhaps no other verses in the Bible have caused so much anxiety on the part of God's people as these verses about the unforgiveable sin. I wonder how many of us have despaired that we have committed the unpardonable sin. I remember also as a child reading the Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress. And there's one section where I saw a man shut up in a prison and he says, I am now a man of despair and I'm shut up in this iron cage and he says, I cannot get out. I sinned against the light of the word, /I breathed against the Holy Spirit and he's gone. I tempted the devil and he's come to me. I have so hardened my heart that I cannot repent. I have shut myself out of all the promises and there remains now to me nothing but threatenings. Oh, eternity, eternity. How shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in eternity. And that passage scared me to death. I had greatly feared that I might have sinned the unforgiveable sin and was locked up forever by Satan and condemned to hell, that I was

not able to believe and that God would not grant me repentance and trust in him. At that time I was going through a great many doubts and I believe that those doubts were a sign that I had committed the unforgiveable sin. I feared that God would not grant me repentance and faith in Christ. And I often went to bed at night trembling in fear of Hell. I thought it was possible to have sinned the unforgiveable sin and to have forgiveness refused and then to come to Christ and have him refuse me. Terrible dread fell upon me when I contemplated the possibility that I was not among the elect, that I was reprobate and that God had destined me for Hell. That only happens in strict Presbyterian churches, probably. My dread as of many people is/perhaps caused by this fear that we have committed the unforgiveable sin. But I believe that we need to understand what Jesus has said here in the context of what the whole Bible teaches about forgiveness. Paul was a blasphemer before his conversion. He even agreed to the death of Stephen. Yet he was marvelously converted to Christ and forgiven. Peter denied the Lord repeatedly - said he didn't even know him, and yet he was forgiven and given a place of promise in the church. David committed adultery and murder and yet the glory of salvation was restored to him. The book of Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost many pharisees and scribes were converted to Christ. Maybe even some who Jesus worned this day. The apostle Paul wrote that some of the Carinthians Christians had been involved in terrible sins, sexual immorality, idolutry, adultery. Some had been male prostitutes and homosexuals. Some had been thieves and greedy people, drunkards, swindlers, slanderers. But Paul said they had been washed, they had been sanctified. They had been justified in the name ;of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of God. The gospel plainly offers forgiveness to all. The apostle Peter cried out on the day of Pentecost, Repent and be bapitized, everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life,

He that cometh to me shall never hunger. He that believeth on me shall never thirst. Him that cometh to me, I will in nowise cast out." We must realize that Jesus directed this warning not to the crowds, not even to his family who thought he was crazy, but to <sup>who were teachers</sup> men/of the law, people who were students of the bible and knew it thoroughly who of all people should have recognized Jesus as their Christ and responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This warning was addressed to men who Mark portrayed as bent on a relentless pursuit of finding a way of destroying Jesus. Like Pharaoh, they had repeatedly hardened their hearts and were now in danger of having God harden their hearts. The Holy Spirit was doing mighty things and yet they attributed the work of the spirit repeatedly to Satan. But the Good News is this. As long as you are willing to change your mind about Jesus, and that basically is the meaning of repentance, in one sense. To change your mind about Jesus and to come to him and believe in him, you need not fear having committed the unforgiveable sin. You might be like Jesus' parents, you might think that Jesus is crazy or insane or have a lot of questions about him, be to a certain extent agnostic. Yet Christ invites you to come to him and to learn of him, and to take his yoke upon you and to learn of him. The apostle Paul, the whole Bible says we live in a day of good news and that invitation still extends to you today. Harden not your hearts. Respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Come to Christ, trust in Him. Believe in Him, obey Him as your Lord and Savior. Amen.