

Things I Wished Jesus Had Never Said

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on June 5, 1994.
Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Some things I wish Jesus had never said. One saying has caused more pain and suffering than any other. Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." How many of us, at some point in our lives, have fallen into despair at the thought that we've committed the unforgivable sin? We feel there's no hope of ultimate restoration. There's no way out. We feel shut up in despair. Tony Campolo recently wrote that 50% of all teenage suicide is committed by young people who discover that they're homosexual. They can't accept what they've discovered about themselves. They try to change but feel unable. They pray. They read the Bible, but they can't seem to change the way they feel. They feel hopeless and worthless. They can't see a way out and they're afraid to talk to anybody, especially somebody in the church. If they're from a Christian home they sometimes feel they've committed the unforgivable sin.

I wish Jesus had never said anything about an unforgivable sin. He was responding to an accusation. Scribes charged, "He's possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." People in the days of Jesus believed in a real devil. They believed in demons. So put aside for the moment our modern tendency to deny the existence of demons. Step for a few minutes into a world where Satan and demons really do exist. Satan claims people as his own and

takes possession of them.

But Jesus came to set these people free. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Jesus said. I've come into this world to plunder Satan's possessions. I've bound Satan! I've opened the doors of his prison, and freed men and women to serve God. How can I do this, if not by the power of the Holy Spirit." And then Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." I wish he hadn't said that.

One thing that makes this story so strange is the accusation of blasphemy. Do we really believe that anything is blasphemous today? Several years ago, devout Muslims accused Salmon Rushdie of blasphemy for what he wrote in, *The Satanic Verses*. The Ayatollah Khomeini ordered Rushdie killed. We, in the Western World, were appalled by these death threats in the name of religion. We weren't, however, appalled by the blasphemy. Most of us felt that an artist has a right to say whatever she or he wants. We didn't quite know how to deal with charges of blasphemy. Charges of blasphemy seem like a throw back to the Middle Ages.

What is blasphemy? Blasphemy is sin directed intentionally against God. For example, all murder is evil, but when men and women are hacked to death and mutilated within a sanctuary and before the altar in a church in Rwanda it seems like the murderers intend to rub God's nose in their sins. That's blasphemy. When we desecrate a cross by spitting on it or when we make crude jokes with sexual

innuendo about Jesus or the Virgin Mary or any of the saints – that’s blasphemy.

But there are more subtle forms of blasphemy. The scribes were calling good evil. They were attributing to Satan, the work of the Holy Spirit. That’s like saying, “Mother Theresa has given her life to minister to the poorest of the poor in India because she’s possessed by Satan.” That’s blasphemy. When that is said consistently and continuously until those who say it actually begin to believe it, we stop being able to distinguish good from evil.

We’ve grown up in an era where it’s quite common to shock people by saying and doing the most sacrilegious things. Nothing is sacred. Nothing is off limits. There are no boundaries. I’m not an art or music critic, but some music and art appears to me to be created for the sole purpose of offending and shocking religious sensibilities. But what happens when men and women don’t recognize blasphemy for the sin that it is? What does blasphemy do to us? What does it do to those of us who are no longer shocked and disturbed by it? Does it numb us to the holiness of God?

Whatever it does, Jesus assures us that “all sins will be forgiven, and whatever blasphemies we utter.” I wish that Jesus had stopped there. But he went on to make one exception, “but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” I wish Jesus hadn’t added that.

When I was a very young boy, my mother would tuck me in every night. Before we prayed, she’d read to me. One book she read was the children’s

illustrated version of John Bunyan's 17th century classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

One chapter describes a man locked in an iron cage who can never get out. He sits there, head in hands, staring in despair.

"I am now a man of despair, and am shut up in it, as in this iron cage. I cannot get out. I left off to watch and be sober; I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts; I sinned against the light of the Word and the goodness of God; I have grieved the Spirit, and he is gone; I tempted the devil, and he is come to me; I have provoked God to anger, and he has left me: I have so hardened my heart, that I cannot repent.... God hath denied me repentance. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe; yea, himself hath shut me up in this iron cage; nor can all the men in the world let me out. O eternity, eternity! how shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet with in eternity!"

I wish my mother had not read that part of the book. There was a picture of that man in the iron cage. I looked at it. It terrified me! I wish I had not looked at the picture. I had nightmares of being shut forever in an iron cage like - day after day would pass, month after month, year after year, throughout eternity - and I would never get out of that cage.

Could this happen to me? Had I committed the unforgivable sin? Had I said something or done something for which I could never be forgiven? When my mother saw how disturbed I was she tried to make the best out of a bad situation. She comforted me by saying, "Jesus has the key to unlock every cage. He can unlock this man's cage. There's not a prison that Jesus can't unlock."

But who am I to say that Jesus should not have spoken of the unforgivable sin? Maybe he wanted to warn us that there really is a titanic struggle going on between God and Satan for the souls of men and women. There's a war going on in the world. The struggle is between a loving God who wants to set human beings free and Satan who wants to possess and shut us up in prison. The battle is between a forgiving God who does not want any to perish and Satan who wants

none of us to be forgiven. A violent battle is raging between God and Satan, a battle confined not only to the first century but a battle that's going on now. But Jesus is more powerful than Satan. Christ came to bind Satan and reclaim men and women for God. There's no sin so terrible that the blood of Jesus Christ can't cleanse it.

Maybe it's a good thing that Jesus said this if it brings home to our hearts and mind and will that no sin is forgivable apart from Christ's death. What he said is a good thing if it causes us to bow in adoration before Christ who, on the cross, took upon himself the penalty for our sins. On the cross, Jesus bound Satan. The crucifixion of Jesus was God's great D-Day invasion of this world. It was the decisive battle between God and Satan for the salvation of humankind. Just as Germans continued to killed allied soldiers between D-Day and Victory-Europe day, Satan, though defeated, still strikes out at us. But the final victory is assured.

On the cross, Jesus bound Satan, opened the door of the man in the iron cage, released him and took his place. By dieing on the cross Jesus released all those whom Satan had shut up in prison. Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world. He took upon himself even the unforgivable sin. He went to hell for us. He serves our sentence, bears our pain, misery and despair. There's no door that Jesus can't unlock. With God all things are possible. We can all trust a God like that in life and in death.

O God, you have assured the human family of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Savior. Deliver us from the death of sin and raise us to new life in him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.