

“Unforgivable”

Mark 3:20-30 ¹

You may remember that I am a birdwatcher of a very amateur sort. I’ve had friends who were serious birdwatchers, but I never caught the bug until about two years ago. Today, though, I’m usually not too far from binoculars, and this is what I see when I’m at my computer at home:

You probably know that we generally hear birds before we see them, but until I began to become curious, I had never paid much attention to the sounds I heard in the trees and bushes. And as challenging as it sometimes is to identify a bird visually, I find it much more difficult to identify them just by their song.

You’ve had similar experiences, I’m sure. Whatever the subject, we generally hear only what we’re listening for and what we’ve prepared ourselves to hear; and we tend to see only what we’re looking for and what we’ve prepared ourselves to see. Everything else we unconsciously bracket out.

That’s what Jesus was talking about when He said, “*the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them*” (Matthew 13:15). Hold that thought. It’s the key to what we’ll consider today; but let me come at it from a different direction. . . .

I’m sure you remember that Jesus was well-known as a healer, and He used miracles of healing both to relieve human suffering and to reveal the truth about who He was to those who had eyes to see. In Matthew’s account of the encounter in today’s text, Jesus had just healed a man who could neither see nor speak, and this healing was apparently so dramatic that the crowd said in amazement, “*Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?*” (Matthew 12:23).

Jesus wasn’t anything like the kind of Messiah that Israel expected, but the signs He performed were dramatic enough to raise serious questions about His identity. As William Barclay put it, “Here was no glorious prince with pomp and circumstance; here was no rattle of swords nor army with banners; here was a simple carpenter from Galilee, in whose words was wisdom . . . in whose eyes was compassion, and in whose hands was mysterious power.”²

And as was usually the case, a contingent of religious officials from Jerusalem was in the crowd, gathering information to try to build a case against Jesus. When these men heard the crowd asking whether Jesus might be the Messiah, they said scornfully, “*No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons*” (Matthew 12:24).

The truth of the matter is that I feel a certain pity for those guys. You’ve probably discovered that it takes a lot more energy to be critical than it takes to do something positive,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 8, 2017. Parallel passages include Matthew 12:31-32 and Luke 12:10; see also Romans 1:18-25 and 1 John 5:16.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 35.

and a critical spirit has a far more negative effect on those who harbor it than on those toward whom it is directed. These were just not happy men.

It's pretty incredible, really. Here we have an afternoon in which many, many people have been healed from their diseases. Those who have been healed are rejoicing; their families are rejoicing; the crowd is listening eagerly to every word Jesus speaks; people continue to bring the sick to Him . . . and through it all the Pharisees are sitting on the sidelines with their arms crossed, saying, "This has got to be the work of the Devil."³

Their problem was that if they had acknowledged Jesus' miracles as being from God, they would have had to listen to Him and obey Him. Given that problem, any explanation of Jesus' miracles would do, no matter how improbable, if it allowed them to think that they weren't accountable to Him. And it's still the same today. Many people—and if we're honest, you and I are sometimes among them—find creative ways to discount Jesus' authority so that we can go on living as we please.

But no matter what we think, and no matter what rationalizations we employ, every single one of us will still make an accounting to God, and there will be no getting out of it. The Bible tells us that "*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable*" (Hebrews 4:13). Indeed, Jesus told us that "*you must give an account on judgment day for every idle word you speak*" (Matthew 12:36).

The teachers of religious law were trying to avoid this kind of accountability, and they ended up with mistaken ideas of what God is like. **As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead** (Romans 1:21b-22). And so it was that the Pharisees muttered to themselves, "This has got to be the work of the Devil."

As always, "*Jesus knew their thoughts*" (Matthew 12:25), and He made several responses to those thoughts. For starters, Jesus said, "Any kingdom, any city, any home that is divided against itself is doomed. There is a war going on here, but it's not a civil war. Satan is not fighting his own forces; I am destroying them. Besides, your own followers cast out demons. Are you prepared to say that their work is 'of the Devil,' too? No, I am destroying Satan's dominion by the power of God, and I am establishing a beachhead for God's Kingdom, whether you choose to be a part of it or not."

And then Jesus dropped the bomb: "*Every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven—except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but **anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come***" (Matthew 12:31-32). It is of this statement that people speak when they talk about "the unpardonable sin." Mark called it "*an eternal sin*" (Mark 3:29).

Now in order to understand what Jesus meant, it's critical to discover whether Jesus was issuing a threat or simply stating what is the case. Was Jesus describing some vengeful action on God's part? Was He telling us that there is in fact one Sin for which the blood of His sacrifice is insufficient? Or was He warning us that God gives us such awesome freedom that we really can choose to place ourselves outside the sphere of God's love, beyond God's forgiveness?

Let me be very clear. **There is no sin—none—for which Jesus' death has not already secured forgiveness, provided** that we repent of the sin and ask God to apply Jesus' sacrifice to

³ It would seem that the religious leaders had not yet committed this sin, or else there would have been little point to Jesus' warning them about it. This was probably a warning, not a sentence.

our Sin. Jesus did not say that God eventually tires of our sin and becomes unwilling to forgive; He did say that you and I really can render ourselves unforgivable. But it is not God who banishes us beyond forgiveness. We shut ourselves out.

Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit works to convince us of our sin and our need for forgiveness, tells us about God's righteousness, made available to us through Jesus, and warns us of the coming accountability of judgment (John 16:8; Hebrews 4:12-13). The truth of the matter is that God's Spirit is always speaking to us; but sadly, there are many times when we're not listening.

And the awful fact is that **it is indeed possible for us to so ignore and to so silence the quiet Voice of God's Spirit that we no longer hear that Voice or recognize it at all. It is at that point that we become unforgivable, not because God has suddenly become unwilling or unable to forgive, but because we ourselves have lost all awareness of our need.** In our persistent willfulness and insistence on self-justification, we can forfeit the only justification that was ever available to us.

The "unforgivable sin," the "unpardonable sin," and "*the sin that leads to death*" (1 John 5:16-17) describe the condition of the person who has refused God so often that he or she has come to the point that sin—and especially the sin of unbelief—is mistakenly regarded as wise and profitable. Our minds become "dark and confused," and, while claiming to be wise, we become "utter fools" instead.

This sin leads to death because it involves a deliberate rejection of the One who alone can bring Life. If a person can't recognize good when he sees it, he can't desire it. If she can't recognize evil as evil, she can't be sorry for it and wish to depart from it.⁴ Once we've become truly and fully spiritually deaf and blind, no *forgiveness* can come to us because no *repentance* can come.

This is the ultimate "use it or lose it" event: God really does give us the awful freedom to ignore His voice. **It really is possible to reach a point where our continued, deliberate rejection of God's Spirit causes us to no longer be able to hear God's Voice, and we have then removed ourselves from the only One who can lead us to repentance and to Eternal Life.**

Now while it's crucially important to realize that such Eternal Sin exists, the good news is that few, if any, of us in this room are actually in danger of committing it. It is far more often the case that you and I are quite aware that we are guilty before God, and, far from denying any need for forgiveness, we're often afraid that some of the things we've done are so horrendous that God will *refuse* to forgive them.

When Pope John Paul II died, Rogers Cadenhead of St. Augustine, Florida registered the Internet domain www.BenedictXVI.com before the new Pope's name was announced. Cadenhead grabbed the name before Rome knew they needed it. Such "preemptive strikes" can sometimes result in significant profit when the more legitimate owner of a domain name realizes that they've been snookered and pay a ransom to get their name back. This became illegal in the U.S. in 1999, but Cadenhead wasn't interested in money.

⁴ Barclay, p. 44.

Describing himself as a “lapsed Catholic,” Cadenhead asked for two things in return for giving the domain name back to the Vatican: “one of those hats” (a papal Mitre); and “complete absolution, no questions asked, for the third week of March, 1987.”⁵

Though these requests were not granted, reading about this unusual stunt caused Max Lucado to write, “Makes you wonder what happened that week, doesn’t it? *It may even remind you of a week of your own life.*”⁶ Here’s a story from Tony Campolo that makes a similar point:

“Sitting with my parents at a Communion service when I was very young, perhaps six or seven years old, I became aware of a young woman in the pew in front of us who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading the passage of Scripture that says, ‘*So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord*’ (1 Corinthians 11:27).

“As the Communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman before me, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that my Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and, in his broken English, said sternly, ‘Take it, girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?’

“She raised her head and nodded—and then she took the bread and ate it. I knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind. Since then, I have always known that a church that could offer Communion to hurting people was a special gift from God.”⁷

And although we’re not having Communion this morning, let me say it again: **there is no sin for which Jesus’ death has not already secured forgiveness.** There is nothing a human can do—and nothing that you have done—that God will not forgive on the basis of Calvary’s Cross, *provided that we repent of the sin and ask that Jesus’ sacrifice be applied to our Sin.*

Jesus himself told us, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it***” (John 3:16-17).

My friends, the central purpose of our life on earth is to prepare us for life in another dimension, a Dimension so real, so amazing, and so brilliant that this life can only be called a shadow by comparison. Though life in this other Dimension is God’s intended gift to us, God does not force us to prepare for it, nor does God force us to enter it, and there does come a time when there is no more choosing.

Let me say it again: **there is no sin under heaven that cannot be forgiven, removed, completely erased by God’s infinite mercy through the Blood of Jesus . . . except the Sin that declines to receive that mercy through refusal to turn from Sin and to ask for that Grace.**

Do you remember what Jesus told us as we began? - “*the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them*” (Matthew 13:15).

⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A3122-2005Apr19.html>

⁶ Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (W Publishing Group, 2006), pp. 131-132.

⁷ Tony Campolo, “Why the Church is Important,” www.christianitytoday.com (5.1.07); excerpted from Campolo’s *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (Perseus Books Group, 2006).

Sisters and brothers, **the unpardonable sin has to do with your heart much more than with your behavior.** So if you're concerned about having committed the unpardonable sin, then, while you may be close to it, you haven't yet crossed the line. The Spirit continues to beckon, however faintly you hear that Voice.

This is infinitely more important than recognizing bird songs. Jesus told us that *“Those who **listen** to my message and **believe** in God who sent me **have** eternal life. They **will never be condemned** for their sins, but they **have already crossed over** from death into life”* (John 5:24).

An old gospel hymn puts these truths this way:

“The cross upon which Jesus died
is a shelter in which we can hide;
and its grace so free is sufficient for me,
and deep is its fountain, as wide as the sea.

“Though millions have found Him a friend,
and have turned from the sins they have sinned,
the Savior still waits to open the gates,
and welcome a sinner before it's too late.

“The hand of my Savior is strong,
and the love of my Savior is long;
through sunshine or rain, through loss or in gain,
the blood flows from Calv'ry to cleanse every stain.

***“There's room at the cross for you,
there's room at the cross for you;
though millions have come, there's still room for one—
yes, there's room at the cross for you.”***⁸

⁸ “Room at the Cross,” words and music by Ira F. Stanphill, 1946.