

Matthew 12:22-37

Have you ever done something that you regard as unforgivable? You know, the kind of thing which means that you can't ever go back to that place where it happened, or you forever avoid the person to whom you did something?

I'm sure that there are plenty of international footballers who by the end of the World Cup won't relish the thought of even returning home fearing that a whole nation will be unable to forgive their mistakes or their failure to win the trophy. But what about God? Can you offend God so much that your actions against him are unforgivable?

Perhaps many of us might point to people like Hitler, or child abusers or murderers and say, "Well, they are beyond the pail – God would never forgive them." Or maybe you harbour a secret fear that there is something in your life – something that you have done, or said, or thought which God could never forgive you for.

Well, this morning as we return to our series working through Matthew's Gospel we come to a difficult passage, one which makes no mention of people like Hitler, but where Jesus simply says in verse 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."

Now that is a concerning verse don't you think, because it makes us much more likely to stop thinking about tyrants and monsters and much more likely to doubt our own salvation. I think that it is essential that we look at that verse more closely because I'm sure that some of us have read it in the past, or picked up on it in the reading today and thought, "Well, hang on a minute – have I ever spoken against the Holy Spirit?"

Am I labouring under the misconception that I'm saved when in fact I have offended God so much that I am eternally unforgiven!"

We can't ignore that question, so let's see what Jesus means then shall we?

So, what we need to do first of all is look at this verse in its context, we need to understand why Jesus made that statement; what had gone on before he said it.

So, let's go back a few verses and remind ourselves of the more familiar elements of this fairly well known story. Matthew in chapter 12 has just told us that Jesus is God's chosen servant, the one on whom God's Spirit rests, now in verse 22 Jesus is presented with a man who is blind and mute. The reason for this man's disability (declares Matthew) is that there is some form of demon possession.

Now don't just discount that as the superstitions of a primitive culture, it is not the case all that every illness, or all blindness for example was seen as the result of demon possession. Quite the opposite, Luke (one of the Gospel authors) was himself a doctor and within all of the Gospels there is a definite distinction between people who are suffering due to an illness, or a condition that they have been born with and those whose condition is connected to something demonic.

Here Matthew very deliberately tells us that the man is blind and mute because of demon possession. He doesn't go into details or tell us how Jesus dealt with that problem, he simply tells us that Jesus healed the man and that everyone was astounded and asked, "Could this be the son of David?" in other words, "Is this Jesus the Messiah – the chosen one of God?"

Great result, everyone is happy. Well, not quite everyone. When the Pharisees (the religious leaders) hear what's gone on their reaction is quite different, what do they say? "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

Now that's a petty response isn't it? Don't you hate it when someone does something brilliant but the only response they receive is petty complaining? Well, that's what happens here, but actually, it's more than that, because what the Pharisees say is dangerous and it is ridiculous.

Now, I say dangerous because the accusation against Jesus made by the Pharisees amounts to sorcery and at the time sorcery was a capital offence. If the Pharisees had been able to make it stick, this could have been their opportunity to kill him, but in the next few verses Jesus shows how ridiculous an accusation it is.

Let me explain with a little Father's Day licence, so if you are weary of the World Cup then please excuse the football analogy, but Jesus says something like this; "Imagine England go out on to the pitch this Wednesday against Slovenia. And imagine that instead of passing to Rooney, Crouch turns around and boots the ball back down the field to Slovenia's Novakovic. Meanwhile Gerrard supports him and blocks Cole from picking up the ball, passes it to Novakovic who is able to slam the ball in the back of the net whilst the David James stands there and does nothing.

I know it sounds a bit like Friday's game, but here's an easy question, is England going to win if they play like that? Of course not! And that is roughly the analogy Jesus uses to point out the ridiculousness of the Pharisees' accusation. Jesus says, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.

If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?”

It's simply foolish to accuse Jesus of using demonic powers to drive out demons – it isn't going to happen, Satan would never be so stupid. And of course, not only that, but if Jesus is using black magic to cast out demons, then what are the official Jewish exorcists using?

So the Pharisees' claim is a ridiculous accusation and Jesus is able to dismiss it easily, but then he makes an important clarification and that is when we get to our difficult verses.

So this is the context and it does help us. Let's hear verses 31-32 again; Jesus says, “And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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.”

So, we know the context, but what does it mean? Well, on the face of it there seems to be a contradiction – every blasphemy will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit won't. Then again speaking against the Son of Man is forgivable, but speaking against the Holy Spirit isn't – ever. What is all this about?

Well, let's start by being honest; most of us when we hear this verse for the first time wrack our brains to see if we have ever said anything against the Holy Spirit, because it appears that if we did then we're done for.

These verses might make you think that if you have ever said anything negative about God's Holy Spirit then you might as well leave here now because you're going to Hell anyway.

Or maybe if you're a little more positive you should just resign yourself to fretting away the rest of your days on this earth anxiously wondering whether or not your salvation is secure.

Well, listen, if that's how it makes you feel you are not alone in your anxiety. Over the centuries this verse has worried many Christians – unnecessarily. Please don't read it like that, instead let me remind you of a few truths from God's living Word;

First of all, verse 31 is true, "every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men", because Paul makes it clear to the Colossians in chapter 2 verse 13, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins"

And that rescue, that salvation is something which we can be confident of. Listen to 1 Peter 3:18; "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."

And nothing can pull you away from God's amazing grace because as Hebrews 6:19-20 states; "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf."

So listen, Jesus is not saying in Matthew 12 that you can become a Christian and then have an off day – I don't know, a bad experience with a charismatic Christian, or a dull Pentecost service or just find yourself lost for words when trying to explain your faith to your neighbour and say something a little detrimental about the Holy Spirit and Bam! That's it your out of God's family forever.

Jesus died on the cross to save you from your sins, his death and resurrection were sufficient and if you have placed your faith in him then your salvation is totally secure. So what is Jesus saying?

Well, he's saying this. If you look at Jesus what will you see? At first glance just an ordinary man. Isaiah said "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Although Jesus was Emmanuel – God with us, he wasn't particularly handsome, or majestic, he didn't glow, he didn't have a halo – if you saw him in the street you could mistake him for just another human being.

Many people did and, let's be honest, many people still do. And as a result many people speak against Jesus and deny him, for example, 2000 years ago Peter denied Jesus after his arrest and Saul denied Jesus until his dramatic Damascus Road experience and I suspect that at some time in the more recent past many of us here today did as well.

But Jesus says, "That's OK, that's understandable, that's forgivable." Verse 32, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven". Peter was forgiven and became the rock of the New Testament Church, Saul was forgiven and became Paul, you have been forgiven and so have I.

So if denying Jesus is forgivable because we can recognise our error, what is unforgivable?

Well, for that we need to go back to verse 28 because there Jesus says that what he has done with the demon possessed man is drive out the demon by the Spirit of God and that as a result the Pharisees should recognise that the Kingdom of God has come upon them.

What the religious leaders did was not reject Jesus, but reject the clear work of God's Holy Spirit. They had not only deliberately refused to acknowledge God's power at work, but had in fact ascribed the Holy Spirit's activity to the devil.

By their own words they have made forgiveness impossible because by denying the work of the Holy Spirit they have cut themselves off from the saving work of God.

You see, we don't become Christians because of our own intelligence or hard work, but simply because we have allowed God's Holy Spirit to open up our hearts and minds and lives to the good news of Jesus. If we are deliberately closed to or set against the work of the Holy Spirit then we have chosen to not receive forgiveness – we have chosen to be unforgiven.

Listen again to verses 31 and 32 of Matthew chapter 12, but this time from The Message. Jesus said "There's nothing done or said that can't be forgiven. But if you deliberately persist in your slanders against God's Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives. If you reject the Son of Man out of some misunderstanding, the Holy Spirit can forgive you, but when you reject the Holy Spirit, you're sawing off the branch on which you're sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives."

It's a great illustration isn't it? Sawing off the branch you're sitting on. Dad's are great, but we're not perfect, one of my favourite tricks is to cut through the power cable when I'm using the hedge trimmers. OK, so I get the rest of the afternoon off, but I haven't solved the problem of the overgrown shrubbery because I have severed myself from the power source which could help me. That's what Jesus is saying happens if we deny God's Holy Spirit.

So it's not that God won't forgive us if we reject or blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, rather, if we deny God's Holy Spirit we will put ourselves in a position where we won't allow ourselves to be forgiven and saved!

Our careless words can still cost lives – our own eternal lives because if we look at the good work which God is involved in and mock it, or if we see what God's Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of others and our response is to be petty or destructive then surely it reveals that we have not allowed God's Holy Spirit to truly change us. That is why Jesus concludes by reminding us that "Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation."

So, although we can choose to turn away from God as Peter reminded us in our epistle reading (2 Peter 2:1-22), we cannot lose our salvation by offending God – remember that in Christ your salvation is secure.

However, the warning of these verses is that we are not to fool ourselves that we are saved simply because we are religious when actually we have never allowed God to break into our lives and free us from the tyranny of sin and the manipulation of Satan. Listen to your words, your jokes, your attitude towards the church of Christ – there's nothing wrong with being constructively critical, or opposing error, but are you petty? Mocking? Disparaging?

What would an unbeliever think about the Church if he or she were to listen to you? You see, if we are truly saved, truly in love with God then surely we are going to love what God's Holy Spirit is doing – because he's done it in us already, albeit in a different way appropriate to us.

So be confident, be assured in your faith, but if you are still on your journey to accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, then don't reject God's Holy Spirit, don't saw through the branch you're sitting on and cut yourself off from God's mercy and grace.

Open your heart and trust in the God who longs to forgive you.
Amen.