

## *Sick of Religion?: The Unforgivable Sin*

*Mark 2:22-30*

It's good to be back with you. The Hackmans and I traveled to North Carolina to meet with a group of leaders who have planted a total of four churches. It was intense ...but very encouraging. We came back feeling like we are on a good track for planting our FIRST new church in Port Orchard. So stay tuned! And a big "thank you" to Pastor Ellis and Julie Hawkins who preached in my absence. What a terrific job they did!

(9:00) Before I start, I want to mention a little thing we do around here called Easter! Just checking: How many Easter services will there be? How many "classic" services? Two! A Sunrise service at 7:00 and the 8:30 service. Now hear me on this: If you want a more traditional service with hymns, organ, choir, orchestra and all the trimmings...you want to attend one of the first two Sunday services. In fact, we need 500 of you to the sunrise service at 7:00! To entice you, we will have hot cross buns and an empty parking lot waiting! (All) Maundy Thursday.

OK...we continue in our series, "Sick of Religion." If you've ever heard anyone complain that they are "sick of organized religion"...you're in good company. Jesus was too...and with good reason! Remember, Jesus is something of a rock star. Everywhere he goes, he is mobbed by crowds who want to hear his teaching, receive his healing and watch as he does battle with evil spirits. Let's pause there for a moment. If you are new to Christianity, the idea that there is a real devil and real evil spiritual forces might seem farfetched to you. I don't have time to go into it today, but I preached an entire series on this topic called "Spiritual Warfare." We've made it easily accessible on our web site. So, if you have questions about it, I urge you to take a look.

But to summarize, we really DO believe there are dark spiritual forces at work in this world. A large part of Jesus' ministry was doing battle with these forces. Mark summarizes this in 3:11: "...whenever the unclean spirits saw [Jesus], they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." In fact, not only did JESUS demonstrate his power over evil spirits, he gave that authority to his disciples! 3:14 "And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons." Spiritual warfare was a huge part of Jesus' ministry.

However unusual this might seem to you, just imagine for a moment that you are the parent or spouse of someone possessed by an evil spirit. In a moment, they are seized by unknown forces, thrown to the ground with convulsions, open eyes unseeing, crying out awful things in an unfamiliar voice. It would be terrifying. And if someone came along who, with a word, could drive that evil power away and set your loved one free, imagine the sense of awe and gratitude you would experience. Surely...SURELY...such a powerful act of deliverance would convince even the greatest sceptics and soften the hardest hearts. Well...not exactly. Mk 3:22-30:

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. But no one can

enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

"Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Remember, the scribes were the religious power-brokers. And they are the bad guys in Mark. They become more and more aggressive in their opposition to Jesus. They are LOOKING for reasons to destroy him. When Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath...it made them so furious that they conspired to kill him. Think about that! They didn't deny that Jesus had restored a man's withered hand. But because he did it on a Saturday... that violated their rules. In today's story...they don't deny Jesus is setting people free from demonic activity. They see it with their own eyes. BUT...since they hate him... since they are DETERMINED to destroy him... they fabricate a perverse explanation for HOW he does these things.

What is it? Jesus is possessed by the devil. "Beelzebul" can be translated "The Lord of the Flies" or "The Lord of the Dung Heap." CONGDON. In other words, to put it crassly, the scribes are saying, "This Jesus is full of B.S....straight from the pit of hell!" Talk about desperate! They can't deny Jesus is doing incredible things. But since they can't deny it, they turn a beautiful act of deliverance into a demonic conspiracy. "Yeah... Jesus is casting out evil spirits. But only because he HIMSELF is an agent of the devil! Jesus is the one who is really possessed!" Do you see how pathetic they are?

Jesus responds with an interesting question. How does the devil cast himself out? We've all seen westerns where someone is thrown out of a saloon. But you've never seen someone throw himself out of the saloon. That's Jesus point. How could Satan throw himself out? And why would he want to? It would be like a kingdom divided against itself. It doesn't make any sense.

Then Jesus uses a disturbing illustration: having your home burglarized. A few years back, I returned to my parked car to find a window broken out and my remote control and vehicle registration stolen. Turns out, they went to the address on my registration, used my remote control to open the garage, and stole from me. Any of you ever been burgled? Any of you in the house at the time? Any of you ever confront the thief? That would be frightening enough. But when you read stories of how homeowners are attacked or threatened if they don't turn over their valuables...now THAT would be terrifying.

That's the parable. The only way you can rob a home is to subdue and bind the man of the house. Then you will be free to sack the place. It's a disturbing image. Here's the most disturbing part. Who is the burglar in this parable? Jesus! Jesus describes himself as the one who breaks into the house, binds the strong man...and plunders the place. Wow. That seems ...harsh, doesn't it? But think about it. Who is the strong man here? The Devil! The Prince of Darkness. John calls Satan the "ruler of this world." Paul calls him the "god of the world." After the fall of Adam and Eve, Satan gained a foothold in this world. Which explains so much about the evil we see happening around the globe and down through the ages. We have a spiritual enemy whom James describes as a roaring lion who seeks to devour everyone he can.

Then comes Jesus Christ. And he says, "That's enough! It's time to rein you in. It's time to put you in your place. It's time to reclaim from you all that you have stolen. You are the Lord of the Dung Heap...the god of rotten things. But I have come to bring life. And you have no power over me." When Jesus talks about binding the strong man, he is describing his battle with Satan. He has come to bind him. To subdue him. To defeat him. And ultimately, to destroy him. Every single person in the gospels whom Jesus sets free... that's one more defeat for the Enemy of our souls. One more victory of life over rotting death.

We might be disturbed to hear that Jesus has come to plunder...but he has come to plunder the Plunderer! It is Satan who seeks to steal life and joy and peace from us. He stores up OUR riches in his storehouse. But victorious Jesus has come to plunder the plunderer...to steal back from Satan what he has taken from us...and to restore to us life and health and joy and peace. How stupid...how wicked...how hateful of the scribes to look at this act of spiritual goodness... and distort it into an act of evil.

Then...Jesus says something that should have caused their blood to run cold. "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin..."

"Blasphemy" means to speak sacrilegiously. Jesus says, "Look, God is willing to forgive just about anything. He will even forgive if you blaspheme...if you speak evil against him...or against me. But when you blaspheme the Holy Spirit...THAT he will never forgive."

Now...what does this mean? What IS blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Think about the context. The scribes have walked 90 miles for the PURPOSE of trapping Jesus. They are LOOKING for trouble. And when they witness incredible acts of spiritual power... people delivered from demonic possession...instead of celebrating it for the good that it is...they declare it to be evil. They are SO twisted in their spiritual perspective... they cannot even recognize the work of the Holy Spirit of God. It is spiritual inversion. They look at good and see evil. They look at light and see darkness. They look at purity and see filth.

That is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It is not a one-time event. It is a process of spiritual decay. A persistent and permanent state of contempt for God. It is saying, "My heart is hard, my eyes are blind, my spirit is rotten...and I like it that way! Leave me alone!" And what Jesus says is, "When you are so spiritually stubborn that you reject every good thing the Holy Spirit does to offer life...then God will give you your wish. God will confirm you in your spiritual rottenness...and you will reach a point where there is no turning back."

It's kind of noble! Jesus is protective of the Holy Spirit. Some theologians speak about the Spirit as the feminine aspect of the Trinity. It's almost like Jesus is saying, "You can say bad things about me... you can say bad things about dad...but don't you DARE badmouth mom!" This verse is one of the reasons I am cautious about mocking spiritual practices that seem unusual to me. It is tempting to mock flamboyant faith healers. And I'm sure there are charlatans out there. But the fact is, the Holy Spirit has always done some crazy stuff! And often through whack jobs. In fact, if you will recall, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit spoke through an ass. He still does! I am exhibit A!

We may look at things we don't understand...healings...acts of deliverance...the miraculous...and say, "I don't get that." Or "I'm not comfortable with that." But when we say, "That's not from the Holy Spirit..." all I can say is, "Be careful! The Spirit work in ways that make no sense at all to us. Be careful about making yourself judge of what is and is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

This idea that someone can commit an unforgiveable sin...understandably can make people nervous. I can't tell you how many times kids came to me during my youth ministry days, afraid they had committed the unforgiveable sin. I told them the same thing I'll tell you: If you are afraid you did...you didn't. The person who reaches this point of spiritual decay couldn't care less! But the good news is, everyone who longs for forgiveness...receives forgiveness!

Jesus forgives! Jesus delivers! Jesus sets people free. Jesus HAS come to plunder the plunderer; to bind the strong man and restore to us all that has been stolen. This meal reminds us of that. Through his death... he ransomed us from a debt we could never pay. And when Jesus rose from the dead...he defeated the Strong Man! He plundered hell...and stole back what had been stolen from him. His treasures. You! And you! And

you! The Holy Spirit of Jesus wants to meet you this day in this meal. He wants to forgive you and heal you and restore you to life.