

Blasphemy!

Say What? The Hard Saying of Jesus, Pt.7

All fall long we've been looking at the hard sayings of Jesus. With apologies to Forrest Gump, we've said Jesus' sayings are *not* like a box of chocolates. With chocolates, you bite right into or right through them, and you digest them. But the hard sayings of Jesus, the wisdom of Jesus, are more like hard candy – like jawbreakers - than chocolates. If you bite right down you can break a tooth. Because with hard candy you have to work on it, going layer through layer slowly, to get the flavor out of it. And the hard sayings of Jesus are like that, perhaps none more than the one we have this morning.

Let me read it to you, **Matthew 12:30–32**, where Jesus says, *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. 31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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 this particular one has haunted people for a long time. As a pastor I certainly have discovered over the years quite a number of people who have been afraid they have committed “the unpardonable sin.” But I

think that even if you didn't have this text, the concept would probably come up.

People would ask, “Is there such a thing as an act or a deed or something so profound, something so deeply wrong and sinful and wicked, that it really can't even be forgiven by divine love? Is there such a thing?” Now we are going to look at this, because if we go through this text layer by layer, if we really treat it as hard candy, we are going to see it teaches us about three things.

They are very profound but sobering lessons. It teaches us about the *problem of forgiveness*. It teaches about the *power of repentance*, and maybe most of all it teaches about the *danger of goodness*. Ok, let's look.

First of all, The Problem of Forgiveness. Now, if you're going to work through these sayings, sometimes you have to look at them from different perspectives. Let me show you the third verse, the last verse. **V.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 we are so quick to want to say, “Okay, what's the sin?” that we miss that there is something general being told to us about forgiveness.

We'll talk about the particular sin in point two, but for just a few minutes, let's step back and say, "But what is Jesus saying about forgiveness in general?" And here's what he's saying: In this verse, actually all the way through, he is showing us almost a paradox, but an important paradox, that God on the one hand is enormously willing to forgive, and yet on the other hand people can put themselves beyond God's power to forgive them.

See the very first thing we're learning about here is the great difficulty of forgiveness. There's an enormous willingness on God's part to forgive, but it's possible to put yourself outside even of God's power to forgive you. Let me show you what I mean. First of all, look at **v. 32a**, "*Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven...*"

That's an amazing statement! We run right on to the second half. But look at that. First of all the term "Son of Man" was a term of *supreme* royalty. The Son of Man is the figure in Daniel 7, where you have this divine figure coming in the clouds, and he's leading the hosts of heaven. He's a figure of enormous royalty. And one thing we know about ancient royalty was the dignity of royal persons was guarded enormously. They went to great lengths.

In the book of Esther, you find the king of Persia - this is not atypical. You couldn't go into one of these ancient kings if he didn't call for you. To go in without being called for was actually a capital offense. You were killed unless he put his scepter out and he pardoned you. And you could *never* speak a word against him. Your speech had to be filled with praise: "Oh king, live forever," and so forth. You couldn't look him in the eye. You couldn't even turn around. You had to back out. You've seen the movies, all the bowing and scraping.

Well, what a different king this is. Jesus Christ says, "You *can* speak against me, and I'll forgive you. You can speak against me, and I won't be offended. In spite of my enormous claims, I am not like human kings." And he's not. On the one hand, you look at the pages of the New Testament, and you see a man who makes claims beyond what *any* human king has ever claimed. He says he forgives sins. He says he's going to judge the heavens and the earth. All kinds of stuff.

And yet, we see humility: children on his knee, touching lepers, eating with outcasts. Here's someone who never, *ever* has even a hint of the attitude that says, "How dare you talk to *me* like that?" He's never offended. He never says, "Do you know who you're talking to?" Absolutely never. And the proof of that was on the cross. Because not only were people talking against him on the cross, they were mocking him. They were cursing him. They were nailing him. They were spearing him. And what did he say? "Forgive them."

So what do we have here? In the first half of this verse, do you see how you go right past it? You're so worried about the second half you overlook the first half. The first half of the verse says there is in Jesus Christ an *infinite* willingness to forgive, absolutely infinite. There is *nothing* he's not willing to forgive, even if you're killing him, you're trampling on him, you're nailing him, you're spearing him. What could be worse than that? He says, "It's all right. I'll forgive you." Amazing.

And yet, see all the more reason then, when we get to the second half of the verse, to take it seriously. The second half of the verse, for a minute let's talk about what it is. What is it telling us? It's telling us, on the one hand, though there is an infinite desire to forgive, it is possible to put yourself *outside* of God's forgiveness. It's possible to do *something*. Someone might say, "How could that be? How dare you say you could put yourself outside the power of God to forgive? Can't God do anything? Isn't that what omnipotence means? Doesn't the Bible say God can do anything?" No way.

I mean there are a whole lot of things the Bible says God can't do. Hebrews 6 says God can't lie. First Timothy 2 says God can't break a promise. And see what we have going here is this: Ancient teachers very often employed *apparently* contradictory, enigmatic, paradoxical statements that are actually trying to give you a coherent but nuanced truth. This is the Socratic method. They are trying to get you to think.

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." See thinking requires tension. Most people just ping-pong back and forth between extremes because they can't handle nuance and tension.

And so what is Jesus saying here? Fairly simple. He says, "You must not pit **my holiness** against **my love**. You must not think just because I have absolute infinite love for you that's all there is to me, that it doesn't matter what you do or how you act, that you'll be somehow unconditionally, automatically forgiven." When Voltaire, the famous French skeptic, was dying, someone said, "Aren't you worried? What if there's a God?" And supposedly he said, "God will forgive – it is his business." He is contractually obligated. That's God's job.

And this text is saying, "It's not!" That's what it's saying. In fact, the best way we can put it is this. Imagine you go downtown here in Austin, and right in the street in front of a lot of people, some people come up and attack you, beat you, and rob you. And those people run away, but they're caught. And in the hospital, you turn to the law enforcement officials, and you say, "I forgive them, so let's not prosecute."

Do you know what the government officials are going to say? “This is bigger than just that. It’s more than just your desire for vengeance. How you feel is not the whole point. We can’t have a *society* if we let people like this do this. There’s more to it. We’re glad you forgive them, but they have to be prosecuted.” See, it’s not just you who was victimized, but society.

Here’s what God is saying, “That’s true *cosmically*. I have no ill will against you, and yet there’s something about the moral structure of the universe that I’ve created, there’s something about justice, there’s something about righteousness that just can’t be written off.”

A couple of years ago we did a long series on the book of Romans and a major source for me were the sermons of the great London preacher, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. And I was really struck by something he said: “I say it with reverence, but forgiveness is a problem even for God. In fact, I must say, forgiveness is the greatest problem in the universe. For in Genesis 1, God could say, ‘Let there be light,’ and in the very next verse there was light. But in Genesis 3, God says, ‘Let there be salvation and forgiveness,’ and it was centuries before it could come off.”

Even God can’t just say, “Let there be forgiveness. Let there be salvation. Sure, everybody is fine. I love you all anyway.” No. And so what Jesus is saying, first of all, is forgiveness is the greatest difficulty in the universe. It’s the greatest problem in the universe. Isn’t that weird? I want to move on, but if you don’t see the problem with forgiveness because you’re so worried about what this particular sin, it’s going to mess up your faith actually.

This is very practical to the spiritual life. In my line of work, I constantly meet two kinds of people when it comes to Christianity. There are a lot of people who look at the gospel - they see Jesus dying for our sins - and they say, “Yeah, I’ve always believed that.” But it doesn’t change them. They’re still chronically worried. They’re still anxious. They’re still driven. They’re still troubled.

Then there are other people who hear the story of Jesus and they say, “Oh my goodness.” And the lights go off, and there’s an explosion on the inside, and *everything* is changed. Nothing drives them anymore. Nothing bothers them anymore. Nothing weighs them down anymore. Why? What’s the difference?

I've started to realize, I believe, the reason people read about the story of Jesus and it doesn't change their lives is they think forgiveness is easy. And because they think forgiveness is easy, they have no idea about what really must have gone on at the cross. No idea of the magnitude involved. The problem for God.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian I quite like. I've gotten to have a chat with him. He is a Croatian theologian who was impacted by the ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war of the 1990's. And he wrestles with how we forgive people who have done atrocities to us. He writes, "[Forgiveness] always comes as a surprise...Forgiveness is an outrage...When forgiveness happens, there is always a strange, almost irrational, otherness at its very heart, even when we are aware that, given the nature of our world, it is wiser to forgive than to withhold forgiveness." (*A Spacious Heart*, 57.)

See that's realism. What Volf is saying is even when you know it's practical to forgive, even when you know it would basically be better for you and for the rest of the world to forgive, even when it happens, you know it's a miracle. If you've ever really struggled to give forgiveness or if you've ever really struggled to get forgiveness, there is something *other*, there is something irrational, there's something miraculous in the heart of forgiveness.

He says forgiveness *shouldn't* be happening. Bad things *cannot* be just wiped out. It shouldn't be happening. But when it does happen it's a miracle. Forgiveness is a *huge* problem, and if you don't know that, if you have a superficial understanding of this whole subject, then the story of Jesus is not going to change you.

I'm thinking about doing a series on forgiveness, because – while it's always been difficult – we're in a really complex age. On the one hand, we live in a postmodern age where all truth claims are seen as relative. "You have your truth and I have my truth". And yet, at the same time, people get more offended when any other truth claim rubs up against theirs. "You offended my tribe, my group, my faith. We're going to shut you down."

Both sides are doing this. There's no desire for middle ground, for compromise, just the annihilation of anyone with a different view. I may call the series, "To Hell with Forgiveness!" But it's amazing, the more we say "All truth is relative," the more offended everybody gets. But we have a perfect antidote here. Jesus Christ never gets offended when people are speaking against him. He's setting an example. Christians should be the opposite of the culture. A Christian should say, "There *is* absolute truth, but God can take care of Himself." Christians should never be offended.

Remember, Jesus claimed to be “*the truth*”. If absolute truth himself says, “I’m not offended when you speak against me,” why should I be? Christians must never get caught into this idea of always being offended because, “You have spoken against me. How dare you do such a thing?” This is why the “war on Christmas” nonsense drives me batty. Christians should be incredibly thick-skinned. Ok, so the first thing we see is the problem of forgiveness.

The second things we see though is The Power of Repentance. V. 31 says, “*And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*” Does that look like it’s saying the same thing as the verse from point one? Not quite. Look closely. Here we see the nuance again – the conflicting tension. “*And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, **but** the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*” You might say, “Well, that sure sounds contradictory, even more than verse 32.”

Because in verse 31, shouldn’t he be saying, “*Almost every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, except this one*”? Or maybe, “*Every sin and blasphemy except this will be forgiven.*” But he says, “*No, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven.*” So there’s the first statement, but then in the second clause he seems to be taking it away – “*but...*” Isn’t that a contradiction? “Son, you’re going to get your allowance no matter what, but if you don’t take out the trash you get nothing!”

Well a couple of commentators I read really helped me on this to realize it’s not a contradiction if you read the first *externally* and the second *internally*; if you read the first clause as if it is talking about external reality and the second clause as if it’s talking about internal reality. And when you do that, it fits in so perfectly with the rest of the teaching of the Bible and actually gives us a remarkable testimony of the power of repentance. What do I mean? Let me show you.

Look at the first verse. Let’s read that externally. “*...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men...*” What he’s saying here is every external action - there is no particular sin, no particular deed, no particular word, no particular action you can do - that in itself, intrinsically, automatically is unpardonable. That’s what the Bible says everywhere. The Bible, over and over, says there is nothing we actually do that would be somehow off limits and now God can’t do anything to save us.

I mean, what does the prophet Isaiah mean when he says, (**Isaiah 1:18**) “*Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*” What does that mean other than to say, “No matter how deep the stain is, I can get it out”? It doesn’t say, “If your sins be as scarlet, all but one of them can be whiter than snow.”

Or you know, here's Paul; he was a persecutor and a murderer. He's forgiven and becomes an apostle. Here's David; he *kills* a man, and probably others, in order to get this man's wife. He's forgiven. He's brought back in; he's accepted. What could this be? Externally, over and over the Bible says, there is no one particular thing you could possibly do to put you outside.

Jonathan Edwards had a very moving sermon on Psalm 25. In the text there's a place where David says, "Pardon my sin because it is very great." And Edwards points out the nuance in what David is saying. David does not say to God, "Pardon my sin *though* it is great." He doesn't say, "Pardon my sin *even though* it is great." He says, "Pardon my sin *because* it is great."

And Jonathan Edwards says, "What kind of God would this be, what kind of big-hearted, gracious God would this be that David knows God will be *attracted* to me because of my sin? He is *more* likely to visit me because of the greatness of my sin, not less." What kind of God is that? That's a God who is certainly saying, "No matter *what* you have done, there is no particular deed that puts you outside of my forgiveness and grace." That's the first half of the verse. But...

Let's read the second part *internally*. However, if you resist the work of the Holy Spirit to lead you to repentance, *no* sin is forgivable. In other words, on the one hand, speaking externally with regard to action, there is no sin that is unforgivable. On the other hand, speaking internally with regard to motivation and attitude, if you resist the leading of the Holy Spirit to lead you to repentance, *no* sin is forgivable - not just this one or this one, not some incredible one, but *no* sin.

One commentator says it this way, "The only sin that God is unable to forgive is the unwillingness to accept forgiveness." (Robert Mounce, *NIBC*, 119). And why does he say that? In the context, what has happened *right* before this is Jesus has just been healing these afflicted people. They're spectacular, miraculous healings. And because they're such spectacular healings, it's the Holy Spirit showing the people that this is the Messiah, and especially trying to show the religious leaders they've been wrong about the Messiah.

And what do they do, in the light of what the Holy Spirit is showing them? They dig in their heels, and they accuse Jesus of doing this with demonic power. And that's when Jesus says this about the one thing that can't be forgiven. What does that mean? The Holy Spirit's job is to show you where you're wrong. Alcoholics Anonymous knows all about this – the first step toward recovery is to admit you have a problem.

1 John 1:9 says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” Now that’s just common sense. Unless you confess you’ve done something wrong you can never undo the damage. You obviously have to admit what you’re doing is wrong.

But AA knows the human heart has *enormous* possibilities of denial. It has an enormous automatic response to any conviction that you’re wrong: denial, blame shifting, what-about-ism, self-justification, and excuses. So you’re still stuck in the flaw. And therefore, AA knows implicitly what the Bible says explicitly, and that is without the work of the Holy Spirit you’ll *never* cut through those denials, you’ll never cut through that self-justification. Never.

And that’s why in **John 16:8** Jesus, talking about the Holy Spirit, says, “*When he comes, he will **convict the world of guilt** in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.*” Now what does that mean? Don’t you see? Now there’s no contradiction. What this is saying is, on the one hand, absolutely anything can be healed through this incredible medicine of humble confession and repentance. But it also means, on the other hand, *without* humility, confession, and repentance, *nothing* can be healed, even the little sins. There’s a remedy for *everything* if you repent. There’s a remedy for *nothing* if you don’t.

One of the great dangers about this verse is almost immediately the reader says, “Oh my goodness. What kind of sin is this?” And you’re thinking of something really dark and really heinous. Can I push you on this? Let’s just say you don’t have any big sins. Let’s just say you’re a nitpicking person. You tend to find fault. You tend to be critical. You know most of our biggest flaws are simply our greatest strengths out of balance. So I’ll pick on myself. I am a critical thinker – that helps me be a pretty good problem solver. Because when everyone is just trucking along in peaceful oblivion, I’m likely to go, “Hey, look out! There’s something you’re not seeing.”

But the downside of being a critical thinker...is you can be critical. Well, duh. But if you don’t realize that...it’s hard for me, but I have to try and see how difficult it must be to have me in a meeting. We never get out for lunch on time because I’ve always got to point out the elephant in the room. “Awe man, we were *ignoring* the elephant!” But if you’re in denial about that, it can ruin your life. You can wind up a lot lonelier than you want to be because of it. It’s a small thing. But people don’t tell you because they don’t even know how to get it across to you.

I'll press this. If you're a Christian parent and you're like that – and you never see it, you never repent, and you never change - your kids could grow up hating the faith, not because you're a hypocrite, not because you're having an affair, you're cheating on your spouse, but just because they grow up hating *that*. They just turn on it because they say, "Look at this lack of Christian character." They can see it. You can't see it. What Jesus is really saying here is with repentance anything can be healed; without repentance nothing can be healed.

For those of you who are married, next time you're in a marriage dispute, a fight, and you think 90 percent of what's wrong here is their fault and only 10 percent is your fault, first of all I can guarantee you that they have some slightly different math in their head. Here's my suggestion. Take the 10 percent that you know you've contributed, and without anger or blame shifting, really just take responsibility and say, "I have contributed this to this problem. I am really sorry." Wait until you see; all the knots will start to untie. The power of repentance. Or wait until they go first. I know some divorced couples that have been waiting *for years*. Anything can be solved with repentance. Nothing can be solved without it.

Now, as much as that works with human relationships, again, we're really talking about the relationship with the divine here. So let me say something to those of you who may be here and not yet be followers of Christ. You can ignore what *I'm* saying and that's fine. I don't want to control you, anyway – that's dangerous. And you can even doubt a lot of what the scripture says – Jesus doesn't take that personally. He's open to wrestling. But it's actually dangerous to resist the promptings of the Holy Spirit long-term.

If somebody dragged you here and it's cold outside and we still have the AC kind of up too high and the sermon is a little longer than the ones you're used to, and you're wondering, "Is there anything in here for me? I don't even believe half this stuff; maybe I don't believe *any* of this stuff," here's just a suggestion. What Jesus is actually saying here is very important. I'm not going to ask you to believe; I want you to hypothesize. If there *is* a God, He would be very hard to believe in. You would need the help of the Holy Spirit to believe in Him.

And so if you begin to feel something – a tug inside. This is not hardcore rationalism nor is it softside emotionalism – the draw of the Holy Spirit is neither and it's both. But if you're ever going to try, if you're ever really going to explore a spiritual process, doesn't it make sense that you would need a Spirit guide? So you need to ask for his help, actually. Sort of a "are you there God, it's me, Margaret" kind of thing. But even more than that, if you start to feel his help, don't turn away.

If He's God, you can't treat him like a salesman. If somebody is knocking at my door, and I'm reading a book, and I say, "Well, it'll be another hour before my book is done. I'll get up and answer the door then," there's not going to be anybody there when I finally open the door. Now, God is much more patient than a solar-panel salesman, but still, don't leave him at the door forever.

Jesus says, (**Revelation 3:20**) "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*" Jesus voice today is the Holy Spirit. And therefore, if you are someone who says, "I'd be interested in checking Christianity out," you need to be sensitive to these spiritual dynamics. You can't just simply say, "Well, I can pick up anytime and just study and come in." No. If you're here, it might be the Holy Spirit, believe it or not, in spite of how bored you are. It might be the Holy Spirit.

And therefore, if the Holy Spirit is ever opening your heart, if you feel yourself being attracted, interested, or even needing God, *listen* to it. Anything can be remedied except resisting his inner promptings. The Holy Spirit is constantly sending you instant messages, just like on your phone. How many "political calls" have you ignored on your phone over the last month? That's fine. Me too. But if you ever get one that says, "Call from The Holy Ghost"...you really should answer that. Don't send the Spirit to voicemail.

Ok, so we've seen the problem of forgiveness and the power of repentance. **Third and last, The Danger of Goodness.** And perhaps the most sobering thing of all...See somebody is going to say, "That's really interesting, pastor. I've always wanted to understand this verse. So what you're saying is the sin against the Holy Spirit is just a refusal to repent. And here I am in church, so box checked." But do you know what? We're not done. I'm not going to take long, but the last thing I have to say is much more sobering than that.

You're not really doing justice to this particular saying if that's all you think it is. Because though this saying *points* to the power of repentance for everybody and though it *points* to the problem of forgiveness for everybody, it's actually talking about something else. The only people who Jesus ever really warns about blaspheming the Holy Spirit in this kind of direct way are *religious* people.

This is Matthew 12, but if you go to Mark 3 or Luke 12, where this passage is mirrored; if you go to any of them, Jesus is talking to whom? He's not talking to everybody in general. He's talking to *religious* leaders. He's talking to moral people. He's talking to "good" people. He's talking to people who know the Bible. You may say, "Yes, of course, but they don't believe in Jesus."

Well there's another passage in the Bible that sounds awfully similar. It's in the book of Hebrews where we spent the summer. But in **Hebrews 6:4-6** it says, "*It is impossible for those...who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance...*"

Jesus talks about something very similar when he says in **Matthew 7:22-23** that on the last day, "*Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*" We can all resist the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's job is to show us we're wrong, the Holy Spirit's job is to show us who Jesus is, but why does he come *especially* to *these* people, especially to religious people?

What he's saying here is what he says all through the Bible. Do you realize over and over and over again, especially in the New Testament, you have pairs of people Jesus meets. You have Simon, the Pharisee, and the sexual outcast woman, in Luke 7. You have Nicodemus, the Pharisee – these are religious leaders - and you have the political outcast, the Samaritan woman, in John 3 and 4.

You have the respectable people, and then you have Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19; he's a social outcast. And in the poorly named Parable of the Prodigal Son, you have the elder brother who stays home and makes money for his father, and the younger brother who goes off and squanders his father's money on prostitutes.

And in *every* single place where you have a religious person and a *non*religious person - a good person, an upstanding person, a person who's in ministry, a person who believes the Bible...and a person who's broken, an outcast, and living a licentious life - Jesus Christ calls them both in, and in every case, the quickest one - or sometimes the *only* one - to respond is the irreligious person. He's just saying the same thing here. He's saying you're more likely to miss the gospel if you're religious and good than if you're not.

You may say, "How in the world can that be?" Actually, it's quite interesting. N.T. Wright, who is one of the most prominent New Testament scholars today, says about this passage that what is happening here is the Pharisees who are being addressed are resisting Jesus' "redefinition of the kingdom." Here's what he means by that. The Pharisees' understanding of the kingdom of God went like this: "We're going to live a good life, and that will lead God to send a Messiah – a deliverer - to get the Romans off our backs."

That was the Pharisees' understanding of how God's kingdom worked. "We're going to live a good life. We're going to be really moral. Because the reason why God has abandoned Israel is we're not obeying the law, and we're not following God's Word. But we're going to be *completely* holy. We're going to be *absolutely* righteous. We're going to go to worship all the time. We're going to obey, obey, obey, and God will reward us by sending a Messiah who will put the good people back on top and punish the bad people - the filthy pagan outsiders."

And Jesus Christ came – as Messiah - and redefined the kingdom of God. How did he redefine the kingdom of God? First of all, he himself comes in weakness and in love and in service. Secondly, he says, "The real problem is not in Rome. The problem is the sin and evil in all of your hearts." And then lastly, he says, "And therefore, it's not the good people who are in and the bad people who are out; it's the **humble** people who are in and the **proud** people who are out." And the Pharisees *cannot* handle that. And that is when Jesus says these words.

"What you don't understand," Jesus is saying, "is the religious people, *more* than the nonreligious, have greater difficulty understanding the gospel." Why? Well religion is the *opposite* of the gospel. Religion is, "I give God a good life, then God rewards me." Right? But the gospel is, "God, through Jesus Christ, gives *me*

a perfect record. Jesus comes to live the life I should've lived and die the death I should've died." Then we're accepted right now, and then we live for him.

Religion is outside-in; "If I live a good life, God will come in and bless me." But the gospel is inside-out. In the gospel, I receive the acceptance I have because of what Jesus Christ has done, and that brings an inner sweetness into my life, and that flows out of my life in waves of mercy and justice. And as a result of that, religious people think they hear the gospel, and they don't. And this is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. This is what is so frightening about Hebrews 6, Matthew 7 - "Didn't we do great deeds in your name?"

This is what goes on. This is the ending. But I'm really sorry that I have to give you the most sober statement at the end of the sermon. I really wrestled with this during the week, trying to figure out how I could make the third point first so I could make the first point last, because the first point feels so much better. But I just couldn't do it that way. The text doesn't unfold that way.

The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is religious people who come into Christianity, who get baptized, who learn the Bible, who get very, very active in the church, who rise up into leadership in the church, and they think they understand the gospel...and they don't get it. In fact, they do just the opposite of what Jesus did.

Because you see, the gospel is you are saved by sheer grace; you're no better than anybody else. But religion creates people who look down at others. The gospel, nothing but love and respect, even for people with whom we deeply differ. Religion creates people who only say their prayers as a wish list. The gospel creates an intimacy in your prayer life. There's as much adoration and love as there is petition. Religion creates people who don't believe they could do these bad things – "I would *never* do that." - so they have trouble forgiving. The gospel creates people who are very forgiving – because they know how much they have been *forgiven*.

Religion attempts to change or better society by power and domination. The gospel changes society by love and service. This is why I get nervous about churches that hand out too many voter guides. Think of Paul's letters for a moment. How much of what he wrote was directed at secular society at large? Almost none. How much of it was to correct those *inside* the church? What's behind his exhortation in **1 Corinthians 5:12**, "*What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?*"

There is nothing worse than being in the church - especially being in the conservative evangelical church - as a Pharisee. But Jesus Christ has the audacity to say in Matthew 7 that on the last day, "*Many ...*" I can't believe that word. He says, "Many will come to me and say, 'We were teaching and preaching. I planted churches. I fed the hungry. I clothed the naked, all in your name,'" and he'll say, "I never knew you."

Pharisaism inside the church not only is devastating for you, because in the end if you ever turn away, Christianity can just become unreal to you. You just walk away, and you're sure you know all the answers. You won't be challenged. Nobody can reach you anymore. Is this sermon making you angry right now? That's a red flag.

But it's devastating for other people in the world, because they look at your life and you look just like everybody else. The world doesn't know the difference between religion and the gospel, because the average person in church doesn't know the difference between religion and the gospel. So everybody is losing.

Is there a word of hope? Yes. Of course! Let's not forget the first point, Jesus solved the problem of forgiveness on the cross - for *all* of us For the prostitutes *and* the Pharisees. Yes, Jesus reserves his harshest words for religious people, but do you know why? Because he loves them so much. When somebody you love is stuck in bad ideas, you can't help but argue with them – that's why some of you get so mad at your parents about politics! But if you didn't love them, you'd just ignore them. Because the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

Jesus does not ignore his attackers. Here they are calling him demon possessed essentially, and he's not indifferent. In fact, this whole passage is an example of Jesus pleading with his critics. You know, what's so interesting about the end of the parable of the prodigal son, as I've already alluded, is the younger brother, the messed-up person, comes back to the father, repents, and goes to the father's feast, which means he's saved, because that's the heavenly banquet.

But the *elder* brother, who has always been obedient and has always lived with his father, will *not* go in because he doesn't like the way the father is handling his money. And the point is the elder brother is further away from the father's heart than the younger brother ever was, but he can't see it. Why? Because

he never left home. Because he hadn't physically left, he didn't realize he was spiritually gone.

And that's the problem. That's the reason why religious people are the *most* likely to miss the gospel and the most likely to resist the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus is saying here. But what is so intriguing is – and you almost miss it - at the very end of the parable of the prodigal son the father comes out and *pleads* with his older son. And if you go back to Luke 15 and look at who Jesus was telling that story too, it's really God pleading with religious people, with the Pharisees. Jesus pleads with his critics too. He's knocking at the door of their heart too.

I just said if this part of the sermon was making you mad, that's a red flag? Well, I'll give you an even bigger, redder, flag. As I have been describing the Pharisaiically religious Christians, who have you been imagining? Who have you wanted to send this sermon too? If this part of the sermon is making you smug...watch out! Here's a warning that we must be very careful of, because it's so insidious: We must not be moralistic about moralistic people. There are people who come to SWFF partly because they say, "Do you know what? I was raised in a church filled with moralistic people, and I came to this church and I heard a different message." Good. That's good. I'm glad.

But we must never become moralistic about moralistic people. Because as I like to say, “the fastest way to become a Pharisee is to hate Pharisees.” We must never come to say, “*We* have the truth, and all these other churches don’t.” We must never get into that. Because the father doesn’t just go out for the younger brother, but for the older as well. The father doesn’t just go out for the tax collector, but for the Pharisee. The father does not just go out for the prostitute, but even for the preacher, and pleads, because he loves us all.

Here’s your word of assurance. If you’re afraid you’ve committed the unpardonable sin, you haven’t. Because that worry - even the worry that, “I might be missing God. I want Him. I don’t want to miss Him” - you’re not capable of that kind of worry in your flesh. Only the Holy Spirit can produce it, so celebrate your anxiety today! We have a God of grace that is so powerful in His grace that your *anxiety* that maybe you’re missing Him is a sign that He’s working. “Pardon my sin, O Lord, *because* it is great.” What a gospel! What a God!

Let’s pray...