

## **Intro**

We've been looking at Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees. We've seen Jesus correcting their understanding of the Sabbath. We've seen Jesus offering soul rest to people weighed down by their extra-biblical commands. And we've seen Pharisee opposition to Jesus intensify. This morning we see another confrontation that raises some theological questions.

Jesus speaks of an unforgivable sin. Questions abound. What is the unforgivable sin? Isn't God forgiving? How can I know if I've committed it? How can I know when a loved one's committed it? This morning I want to help you get some clarity in case some wacky views you've heard are troubling you.

Jesus also discusses the principle of good and bad fruit. He assumes if a person is a believer they bear good fruit. And he assumes if a person is a non-Christian they bear bad fruit. How does this work? This morning I want to help you process this principle. This morning we ask this question:

**BIG QUESTION: What does Jesus have to say about faith and fruit?**

## **READ PASSAGE**

## **PRAY**

## **Body**

### **Passage Focus**

An episode highlighting Pharisee rejection leads to instruction on the nature of faith and fruit.

FCF: rejecting Jesus' works and claims; fallen hearts that require regeneration

Grace given: warning and from elsewhere in Scripture the hope and help of the indwelling Spirit

### **Point 1: Faith is allegiance to Jesus (12:22-32)**

#### **Explanation**

"Then" = sometime after Jesus healed a man's hand on the Sabbath. The occasion for this controversy is Jesus casting demons out of a man who's blind and mute. With the demons cast out, the man was physically healed.

The Pharisees were troubled by the crowd's reaction: *"Can this be the Son of David?"* Seeing Jesus' mighty works, they wondered if Jesus was the promised Messiah. Calling Jesus the Son of David = calling him the Messiah (see Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-10; Jer 23:5-6; Ezek 37:24-28).

So if you're the Pharisees, you've already decided Jesus isn't from God and you've conspired to kill him (Matt 12:14). After all, he doesn't keep our traditions, like the Sabbath, so he's against

God's law. But the crowds wonder if he's the Messiah. You can't deny the miracle that just took place, but you can't endorse Jesus. How can you explain what happened?

They responded, *"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."* In other words, Jesus' ability stems from demonic powers. An interesting spin to control the narrative. Jesus, knowing their thoughts (he's not a mere man), responds in several ways:

1) The Pharisees' claim is illogical

Kingdoms that battle amongst themselves will come to ruin (12:25-26). Why would Satan use me to war against himself? Jesus is saying, "Your theory is implausible because Satan would never lead his forces to oppose each other. He knows this would ruin his kingdom."

2) The Pharisees' claim indicts their own disciples

*"And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges."* = If my power to cast out demons comes from Satan, doesn't that mean your disciples cast out demons through Satan's power? Are you saying your own disciples are demonic? In any event, your own disciples will judge you for rejecting me. Some of the Pharisees' disciples will recognize who Jesus is and trust him, and they will judge the Pharisees at the final judgment.

3) My power stems from the Holy Spirit

Jesus attributes his power to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's presence means the kingdom of God has arrived. The kingdom was near (4:17). Now the kingdom is present and active.

4) My power over demons proves my power over Satan

*"Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house."* = In order to plunder Satan's house (= cast out demons) one has to overpower Satan. I cast out demons because I have power over Satan = Satan is weaker and powerless to stop the kingdom of God. Jesus was already binding Satan.

Logic gives way to warning. This isn't only for the Pharisees. Remember the crowds saw Jesus' power and heard the Pharisees' narrative.

Jesus says, *"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."* You're either with me or against me. You either follow me or oppose me. No middle ground. Indifference = rejection. Implied is follow me because you're in danger = the blasphemy of the Spirit.

## **Application**

What is this unforgivable sin?

Blasphemy against the Spirit, in context, = attributing the work of the Spirit to Satan. In this and previous episodes, the Pharisees, despite clear evidence of the deity of Christ, rejected Jesus' works and attributed them to Satan. They were in danger of permanently hardening themselves

against Jesus. The unforgivable sin = **final and settled rejection of the Spirit's work despite undeniable evidence.**

Some evangelical traditions understand the blasphemy of the Spirit to occur when a believer loses their salvation. A person turns from following Jesus, the Holy Spirit departs from them, and they are permanently unable to repent. Note that this isn't what's happening in Matthew 12. The Pharisees have been unbelievers throughout. When John the Baptist arrived he called the Pharisees a "brood of vipers" and told them they needed to repent, and if not they would be thrown into hell's fire (Matt 3:7-12). The Pharisees aren't an example of Jesus' followers losing their salvation. The Pharisees illustrate unbelievers hardening themselves against Jesus to the point where their hardening is permanent.

As for loss of salvation, if a person is genuinely converted they cannot depart from the faith. We are sealed with the Spirit for final redemption (Eph 1:13-14), being born again and indwelt by the Spirit God strengthens our faith so it doesn't fail (1 Pet 1:3-5), when the Father gives a person eternal life they cannot perish (John 10:27-29), and every person who is ever justified will be glorified = there is no slippage in God's plan (Rom 8:30).

In case you're worried, this sin isn't something we can casually stumble into. It's not like we're duped and we dismiss the Spirit's work once and then we're doomed forever. The unforgivable sin is deliberate and willful hardening. In our passage, Jesus says sin in general, blasphemy, and speaking against Jesus can be forgiven. God is a forgiving God. No matter how bad your sin might be, Jesus died for sinners. He took the punishment our sins deserved. And Jesus' payment is worthy to cover each and every sin. Jesus noted how prostitutes and tax collectors could be forgiven. The apostle Paul, who wrote 13 of the NT books was a murderer who hunted down Christians to put them to death (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-3). Paul said this about himself:

**1 Timothy 1:15-16** The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

God is patient with sinners!

Exhortation: we want non-Christians to hear God's word and repent and believe. So we want non-Christians to feel welcome around us, like in this service. We want to invite our non-Christian friends to this service. Without changing our message or denying Scripture, we need to be merciful and commend God's mercy.

If you're worried that you've committed the unforgivable sin, you're not the sort of person we're talking about. Those who've committed the unforgivable sin (maybe some of the Pharisees who opposed Jesus here?) weren't concerned about their rejection. Their sin was unforgivable because their rejection was settled and final. They witnessed overwhelming evidence and said no. People wishing to repent and receive forgiveness haven't reached this state. People concerned about where they stand with God haven't reached this state.

We should also be careful to presume that certain unbelievers have committed the unforgivable sin. We can't see that deep into someone's heart. And we should hold out hope that even the most despicable and hardened of sinners can repent. If a murderer of Christians can become the author of a good part of the NT, surely there is hope for sinners in your sphere of life. God can turn rebels into followers. So pray for your friend rather than presuming their salvation isn't possible (see Matt 19:24-26).

If hardened opposition is the anti-faith, true faith is allegiance. The root of allegiance is faith. Trust that Jesus is for us. That he's meek and humble and has our good in mind. He came for us when we were harassed and helpless. He died to bring us rest from the guilt of our sins. He brings rest to our souls when we're worn out and our burdens are too much to bear. Trusting that he's for us, we join ourselves to him. His purpose becomes our purpose. His teaching our teaching. This is why Jesus can say a good tree produces good fruit. Trust, and gratitude, produces a desire to obey Jesus' teachings however imperfectly we live them out. Love drives allegiance.

Rejection is a little different and comes in a number of forms. Maybe indifference. Jesus isn't important so he really has no place in my life. Maybe mockery. The claims of Christianity are ridiculous and Jesus is a laughingstock. Maybe anger. Hatred towards Jesus. This was the stance of the Pharisees. The Pharisee spirit lives on in hatred for God, his Word, his people.

## **Point 2: Fruit springs from our heart (12:33-37)**

### **Explanation**

Jesus is discussing universal principles about the human condition. There are two general principles here:

- 1) *"the tree is known by its fruit"* = a person is known by their character, whether good or bad (Jesus leaves room for only two categories).
- 2) Our outward actions spring from what's inside our hearts = heart condition drives behavior

These principles are illustrated with our speech. How one talks reveals what's inside a person's heart: *"For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* Caution: this isn't salvation earned through good speech. This means that our words either vindicate (justified) or condemn us. Here "justified" is used in the sense of vindicate, or demonstrate to be right. As a tree's fruit reveals what sort of tree it is, our speech reveals the state of our heart, whether good or bad. The term "careless" is used elsewhere for idle/lazy or useless ("faith apart from works is useless" – James 2:20). The indictment in context is the Pharisees' verbal rejection of the Spirit's work in Jesus. They were sinfully careless with their words. And what they said about Jesus (he's a minister of Satan) revealed what was in their hearts: they were a brood of vipers. Their words gave them away.

## Application

Jesus speaks to the nature of the human heart. The heart = our inner life. Like our thoughts, feelings, and desires. Jesus' principles assume certain theological realities.

- 1) Inherited corruption = our tendency to sin as a result of the sinful nature we have inherited from Adam (Adam's one trespass affected the moral ability of all humans who followed after him = slavery to sin)

**Romans 8:7-8** For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. [former murderer of Christians explaining theological realities = God is forgiving and changes people!]

- 2) Regeneration = being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, or being born again (being indwelt by the Spirit results in new ability to live as God commands...we are no longer slaves to sin)

**Romans 8:13-14** For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ...

- 3) Progressive sanctification = the process of spiritual growth whereby through divine enablement and our own use of the means of growth we sin less and become more like Jesus (means include Bible meditation, prayer, reading books written by gifted Christian teachers, Sunday morning service, small groups, etc. – means are individual and corporate)

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

- 1) One does bad as a consequence of inherited sin = will do bad without regeneration
- 2) One does good as a consequence of regeneration = will do good if regenerated
- 3) In reality the believer produces a mix of good and bad = sin still exists, but the Spirit is working (Jesus assumes indwelling Spirit = fruit will be present, change has occurred, & growth is still occurring)

**2 Corinthians 3:18** And **we all**, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

- 4) In reality believers are at different levels of good and bad based on where their growth is at presently (presence of fruit ≠ the absence of sin)

What do these realities say to us? Sin occurs at the level of desire, so our desires need to change. We do what we do because it's what we want. We want what we want because of the condition our heart is in. Changing our desires requires heart change. We need to cultivate our heart by using the means of growth found in the Bible. The good news is God is in the business of heart change.

If you wouldn't identify as a Christian, what is this saying to you? Jesus is issuing a warning. Don't harden your heart against me like the Pharisees. And he's revealing the reason behind your frustrations. Why do I act the way I act? Because I inherited a sinful nature from Adam. Because I act according to what I desire. Because my heart is messed up. Why is it so hard to change? Because I don't have the help of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus offers you rest. A cleansed conscience. Sins forgiven. Peace with God. No more resisting your Creator. He says trust me. Follow me. And your soul will find rest. Your sin is your problem.

### **Conclusion**

**What does Jesus have to say about faith and fruit? Faith is allegiance to Jesus.** We learn from Jesus. We follow Jesus. We stand for Jesus when he's opposed. Why? Because we trust him. That he's for us. He came to bring rest to our souls.

**Fruit springs from our heart.** How we live reveals who we are. Because of our sin problem, we need divine help. We need heart correction. Trust in God for change, not yourselves. Make use of the means of growth God has provided, whether the Bible or the local church.