

HE SAID *WHAT?* HARD SAYINGS OF JESUS



Most of us are familiar with things Jesus did.

- ▶ Walking on water.
- ▶ Feeding five thousand with the loaves and fishes.
- ▶ Healing a blind man.
- ▶ Dying on the cross.

We're equally familiar with many things He said:

- ▶ Love God.
- ▶ Love your neighbor.
- ▶ Fear not.
- ▶ Do good.

We love these teachings, and they certainly line up with what we know about God: His love, peace, and goodness. But Jesus also said some other things that don't end up as framed prints on our walls.

- ▶ Sell everything you own.
- ▶ Love your enemies.
- ▶ Hate your parents.

Some of the teachings of Jesus are difficult, but we would be wise to see why Jesus said them.

So let's dive in to these hard teachings. What we'll find is that these hard statements—these seemingly counter-intuitive or counter-cultural teachings—are where we find the abundant life Jesus promises to those who really follow Him.

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SESSION 1

GOD WON'T FORGIVE THIS SIN



*Growing up, what was an
“unforgivable sin” in your home?*

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

God does not forgive those who reject Jesus and never seek His forgiveness.

THE PASSAGE

Matthew 12:22-32

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

A friend of mine told me about an encounter he had with a woman seated next to him on an airplane. It was a typical conversation until he told her he was a pastor. At that point, she became upset and began talking about a terrible crime one group of people had committed against another. My friend was also shocked by the immoral act, but the woman's insistence that "some sins should not be forgiven" and "those individuals should be condemned to hell forever" genuinely caught him off guard.

Before my friend could respond, the woman addressed her own sins and shortcomings. She declared, "I know I'm not perfect, but God knows my heart. I attend church, try to help others, and I'm a good person. So, I know God will forgive me, and one day I'll go to heaven!"

Is this woman correct? Are there some sins God will not forgive? Is being "religious" or "a good person" all it takes to get heaven? Jesus' confrontation with a group of Pharisees found in the Gospel of Matthew will help to answer these questions.

Matthew 12:22-23

22 Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

23 And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?”

While Jesus was on earth, He met some interesting people. On one occasion, a group of men brought “a demon-possessed man” to Jesus. The word *demon-possessed* may seem odd, but it’s an important word to keep in mind; it means to be owned by evil spirits. The evil spirits in this man prevented him from being able to speak or see. Some scholars even believe this man’s physical blindness was symbolic of his spiritual blindness.

During this time, people believed demon possession was caused by big sins in someone’s life. To the Pharisees—the religious leaders—this man was so deep into sin he had been rendered both blind and mute. We don’t know how long this man had been controlled and tormented by the evil spirits, but they surely had made his life miserable.

This man may have tried everything possible to remove this demon, but no one could help him. Possibly for years this man had tried everything within his own power to be free from the evil spirit. Those who tried to help him may have accepted the popular notion this man was just a sinner who had no hope. Some days even he may have believed the same thing.

All that changed when he was brought to Jesus. The people who brought the man to Jesus knew Jesus was the only one who could help him. After all, they had tried everything else to no avail, so they came to Jesus with a degree of hope and trust that He could help.

We all know people who seem to be controlled by evil. Their lives are in direct conflict with God, but they live the way they do

because they are living without Jesus. Like the demon-possessed man, they also need to encounter Jesus. That is true of all of us; we all need an encounter with Jesus, because we are all sinners in need of forgiveness.

No matter how evil people may seem or how sinful they are, they are never beyond God's power to forgive. Clearly, the demon-possessed man before Jesus was full of evil, but what did Jesus do? "He healed him." In those three short words, we see the incredible power of God.

The work of Christ—the power of God—is why it is crucial to share the gospel with all people, no matter how bad we think they are. We often think they won't listen, go to church with us, read the Bible, or accept Christ, but we underestimate the power of God when we think that. God works through even the smallest seeds we plant, seeds of His love and grace. I have lost count of the number of people I've seen who rejected Jesus at first, only to accept Him much later.

No matter how many times a person rejects Jesus, He stands ready and waiting to forgive, but each individual must come to Him. Our responsibility is to point people to Jesus. If we want individuals to experience life change, we have to point them to His sacrifice, forgiveness, and love. The demon-possessed man couldn't find healing, deliverance, or forgiveness anywhere else. When he finally came to Jesus, Jesus was there, ready and waiting for him.

When the demon-possessed man was transformed by Christ, it pointed to the power of God. "All the people were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'" When we point people to Jesus, their lives are changed, and the transformation Christ brings to a person's life points to God Himself.

Where have you seen the power of Jesus at work around you?

QUESTION #2

Matthew 12:24-29

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”

25 Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.

26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?

27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

29 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.

KEY WORD: Beelzebul (v. 24)—Probably derived from the Hebrew term “Baal-zebub,” meaning “lord of the flies,” the Jews used Beelzebul to refer to Satan.

The Pharisees were not fans of Jesus. These religious teachers were constantly protesting Jesus’ actions and words. They accused Him of blaspheming when He healed the paralytic (Matt. 9:2-3); of consorting with sinners when He ate at Matthew’s house (vv. 10-12; Mark 2:14-16); and of breaking religious law when His disciples did not wash their hands before they ate (Matt. 15:1-2). Since Jesus did not conform to their religious traditions, the religious leaders were always looking for ways to discredit Him before the people. So when the people suggested Jesus might be “the Son of David” (12:23), a term referring to the Messiah, this angered the Pharisees.

The Pharisees accused Jesus of driving out demons “by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.” They were saying everything Jesus did was through the power of Satan; therefore, He must be of Satan.

Jesus' response showed the foolishness of their thinking. Why would Satan battle against himself by healing those he had power over? If that were true, it wouldn't be long until his kingdom crumbled. As if that were not foolish enough, Jesus asked a follow-up question: "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?" If Satan gave Jesus the power to drive out demons, who's to say he was not giving power to the Jewish exorcists as well?

The Pharisees had committed their lives to studying God's Word—the very Word that gave them proof Jesus was indeed “the Son of David” (v. 23)—and yet they refused to acknowledge Him. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40).

These men piously obeyed the laws of God, but they lacked a relationship with Him. They believed keeping the law was the way to please God. Their self-righteousness caused them to miss the Messiah Himself who was in their midst. They rejected Jesus, His message, and ultimately His sacrifice on the cross for their sin. Their self-righteousness blinded them to the truth about Jesus' identity.

The failures of the Pharisees should be a warning for us today. When we are in a place where God is using us, we can feel like we are special and become self-righteous. However, we are special because of *who* we are *in* Christ, not because of *what* we do *for* Christ. Regardless of how Jesus has gifted us to serve His kingdom, those gifts are not for our glory, but for His.

Jesus stated that His power over demons was accomplished “by the Spirit of God”; therefore, “the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The Pharisees were blinded to this truth, so they saw no need to repent and turn to Him. We know people like this today. They will mock the church, Christians, and even our personal testimonies. We have to remember they don't know Christ and His love for them. We were once like them. We were once rebels without Christ, but His kindness led us to repentance. Likewise, our kindness can lead

them to a better understanding of Jesus, His sacrifice, and His offer of forgiveness. God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:3-4), so He shows great patience in dealing with sinful people. That type of patient love should flow through us.

What are some ways our culture responds to the work of Christ?

QUESTION #3

Matthew 12:30-32

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

KEY WORD: Blasphemy (v. 31)—Meaning “to speak evil against” or “to slander,” the term is usually connected to speaking evil against God or His people.

Jesus delivered an ominous warning. He prefaced it by pointing to the greatness of God’s forgiveness, even forgiveness of those who speak against Jesus. “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.” Jesus made it clear that sin against Him—blasphemy, irreverent speech, or slander—can be forgiven.

But there is a limit to God’s forgiveness. “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is serious, and it is

sometimes referred to as “the unpardonable sin.” The Holy Spirit speaks into our lives the truth of Christ. He convicts “the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). To reject the Spirit’s message is unpardonable. Why? If we reject His message, we see no need to repent and come to Christ. God’s forgiveness is limited in that He won’t forgive us if we do not seek His forgiveness.

How would you explain blasphemy against the Spirit and why does God refuse to forgive this sin?

QUESTION #4

Jesus warned the Pharisees of this unforgivable sin because they refused to accept Him. Jesus cast the demon out of the man by the power of the Holy Spirit, but the Pharisees rejected the Holy Spirit’s message. If a person does not accept the Spirit’s message about Jesus, how can he be forgiven? He can’t! Forgiveness is not possible.

At one time or another—even if momentarily—everyone has rejected the Spirit’s call to repent, believe in Jesus, and commit to live for Him. While some people immediately embrace Christ as Savior and Lord the first time they hear the gospel, for most of us, coming to faith in Christ was a journey. For many of us, God had to soften our hearts, break down the walls we had constructed, and loosen the grip we had on our pride. We had moments of resisting the call of Christ, but we eventually said “yes” to Jesus and asked Him to forgive us. And he did. He forgave all our sins.

Jesus’ warning is very serious, but it has caused people to wonder, “What if I have committed the unpardonable sin?” The very fact that you accept the truth about Jesus Christ and have a desire to turn from sin and follow Him is a sure sign you have not committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit!

God is lovingly patient with us and wants to forgive and give us

eternal life with Him in heaven. That is why we have to be persistent with those who reject God. As long as they have breath in their lungs, we need to keep sharing and praying that one day, they too will accept Jesus. It is important for us to tell others about Jesus and love like Christ would love them each and every day. Our living example of God’s love could be the final straw that moves someone from rejecting to believing the Holy Spirit’s testimony about Jesus.

How does this passage give someone hope when they feel that God could never forgive them?

QUESTION #5

“GOD COULD NEVER FORGIVE ...”

Take a moment to write your responses to the following questions:

What have you heard people say is the unpardonable sin?

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What are some sins that might cause unbelievers to say, “You don’t know what I’ve done; God could never forgive me for ...”?

.....

How would you respond to these statements based on today’s session?

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LIVE IT OUT

The woman on the plane (p. 85) was offended by the sins of others, but she didn't believe her sins were bad. All sin is offensive to God, and we all need to come to Christ to be forgiven. What will you do with that truth?

- ▶ **Walk.** Pride keeps us from seeing our own need for Christ and His forgiveness. Allow the Lord to search your heart for areas of pride that point to reliance on self and not on Christ.
- ▶ **Run.** It can be hard to be around people who are resistant to what Christ offers. Pray for patience! God is often working “behind the scenes” in a person's life, so pray for opportunities to be used by God to patiently plant seeds.
- ▶ **Soar.** You know others who need to hear the gospel and come to faith in Christ. Ask God to open their hearts to receive His forgiveness, and pray for opportunities to share the message of Christ.

