

THE GREATEST SIN OF ALL
Mark 3:20-30

November 12, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

The focus in the media over the past week outside of politics has primarily been on two men. The first, Saddam Hussein, last week was sentenced to death for tortuous atrocities against his own people. Many would claim that Hussein is the most evil man alive today, a modern day Hitler. His wickedness was plainly seen as the court read the verdict. Hussein had requested death by firing squad if the verdict was the death penalty and upon hearing that his execution is to be by hanging, he repeatedly interrupted the reading, hurling death curse upon death curse upon various groups and people, “Long live the people, down with the traitors, God is great, down with the conquerors, curse (*see note below*) you and your court, you are the enemies of humanity, curse the losers, you are traitors, life for us is death to our enemies, long live the nation and death to our enemies.”¹

Most people would not consider the second man evil and wicked like Hussein. As a matter of fact, he *was* one of the most respected men and pastors in evangelical circles today. He *pastored* one of the largest churches in the country and *was* president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Notice the past tense of the verbs. Ted Haggard, after initially refuting the charges of sexual relations and the purchase of methamphetamines made by a male prostitute and lying about his past, admitted to gross acts of lewdness and inappropriate behavior. In a letter addressed to his congregation, his confession included, “I alone am responsible for the confusion caused by my inconsistent statements. The fact is, I am guilty of sexual immorality, and I take responsibility for the entire problem. I am a deceiver and a liar. There is a part of my life that is so repulsive and dark that I’ve been warring against it all of my adult life.”²

The stories of both of these men bring different emotional responses. We are gladdened by the verdict of the courts in Iraq that have brought justice against such an evil man, while we are saddened by the great fall of a man who admits to having a side that, though not as atrocious as Hussein’s, is just as dark and heinous. Both of these men serve as a portrait of the sinfulness of sin, sin so deep and so rooted in our nature that apart from God’s grace there would be no forgiveness. But therein lies the truth of God’s grace. Sin, whether it is of the stripe of Hussein’s or the color of Haggard’s, whether it is of one who is opposed to Christ or of one who professes Christ, can be forgiven in and through the saving merits of Christ alone. Torture, murder, adultery, homosexuality and drug abuse can all be forgiven at the Cross of Jesus Christ. *There is no sin that cannot be forgiven, save one.* That is the focus of our attention this morning as we look at the greatest sin of all.

I. Hindrances to the Gospel (3:20-22a)

We are entering into season that we all look forward to each and every year. The Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks provide much needed respites from jobs and school and are times that we gather and relax with those whom we are closest. Our text opens with the words, “**And He came home.**” Home should have been a place of refuge, a place where Jesus could get

¹ CNN Online, <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2005/saddam.trial>. The word “curse” is actually “damn” in both instances, changed for appropriateness with the presence of children in congregation.

² From Ted Haggard’s written statement, http://www.newlifechurch.org/db_images/TedHaggardStatement.pdf.

away from it all and fellowship with His family and friends. However, as we have seen, wherever Jesus went there was no down time and this was no less true on His return home. Mark reminds us of three groups of people that, knowingly or not, served as hindrances to the gospel and Jesus' ministry on this earth.

1. The crowds (v. 20)

Mark writes, **“And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal.”** Everywhere that Jesus went the crowds were sure to follow. Jesus' homecoming was no exception. However, as we noted on previous occasions, the size of the crowds did not necessarily reveal their hearts. Many were bandwagon jumpers, seeking Jesus out for their own benefit rather than for His purpose in coming to this earth and ushering in the kingdom. They were more enamored with His miracles than His message.

On this occasion, the crowds were so great that **“they could not even eat a meal.”** The demands of the ministry are often as such. Notice the **“they”** here. Jesus' newly called apostles were learning the demands of the gospel at the feet of the Servant. As one writer put it, “The throng was so pressing, that they could not get opportunity for their ordinary meals. The labors of Christ's work, as we have it to do, will often interfere with convenience and comfort of the flesh.”³ While Jesus knew that many in the crowd were there for all the wrong reasons, He shows great compassion for them nonetheless. It is not just that they *could* not eat a meal, but that they *would* not. Jesus made every effort to demonstrate His calling as a Servant and took this opportunity to model servanthood to His apostles.

However, Jesus' compassion for them should not be construed that the crowds were not a hindrance to the ministry of Christ. There were often times when Jesus departed the crowds and went to a secluded place to spend time in fellowship with the Father. You remember on one of these occasions Peter and his companions come to Him and say, “Everyone is looking for You.” And what was Jesus' response? “He said to them, ‘Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for’” (1:37-38). Jesus knew that these people sought Him not as King but as simply a miracle worker. But His purpose was his message, not His miracles, which served to verify His message. So we see, as Edmund Hiebert rightly notes, “The persistent pressure of the clamoring crowds formed one of the burdens of His strenuous ministry.”⁴

2. His family (v. 21)

“When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, ‘He has lost His senses.’” “His own people” is commonly held by most scholars to be a reference to Jesus' kin. Mark is the only one of the gospel writers to include this reaction from Jesus' family. There are a few things that we note concerning their reaction.

First, we have no reason to believe that they were not acting out of love for Jesus. Certainly it would have been much easier to simply let Jesus go. But in their hearts and minds Jesus was “out of His mind” and they thought it better for Him to be under wraps, even if it meant His arrest, which is the correct translation of **“to take custody of Him.”** At least in prison He would be protected and isolated from the crowds. This would provide an opportunity for Him to come to His senses.

³ Melancthon W. Jacobus, *Jacobus' Notes on the Gospels: Mark and Luke*, 28.

⁴ D. Edmund Hiebert, *The Gospel of Mark*, 97.

Second, they were perhaps concerned that His religious fervor was a detriment to His health. After all, He was not even able to keep a reasonable eating schedule! Kent Hughes comments,

In a culture where meals were rituals and food was scarce, this was considered insane! Word also came that the press of the crowd along the seashore was so great that he was in danger of being trampled and that he kept a small boat ready for a quick getaway. Besides, no sane man would give up a business which met his needs, set himself against the powers that be, and gather a motley group around him such as he had. They were afraid that his crazy life would kill him.⁵

So we see that Jesus' family was looking at His life and ministry practically, and they did not like what they saw. They literally feared for His life, not at the hands of others, but they feared He might do Himself in.

But a third reason that His family thought Him mad was their misunderstanding of His life as a Servant. They did not understand His willingness to cater to the crowds. As Hiebert assesses, "They could not explain His willingness to be constantly imposed on by people except as an abnormality in Him."⁶ The reaction of the family is described by one writer as born out of "deep personal concern combined with a want of sympathy for His aims and purposes."⁷ In other words, they were blinded by love and practicality. Because of this, Jesus' family, those you would think would be part of the "in" group, were a hindrance to His ministry.

3. The scribes (v. 22a)

Jesus' ministry was not only hindered from within by His family but more expectedly from those without. Unlike the case with Jesus' kin, the opposition of these men was deliberate and malicious. These men were relentless in their continued attempts "as to how they might destroy Him" (3:6). As we noted a few weeks ago, Jesus, knowing their hearts, withdrew from these men (3:7) who were driven by pride and jealousy. They could not stand the fact that Jesus was more popular than they. They have been a constant source of irritation for Jesus throughout the first half of His ministry. But even though Jesus withdrew from them, here we see them relentlessly pursuing Him, "**The scribes who came down from Jerusalem.**" These were the big dogs, the religious elite who sought to put an end to Jesus' ministry right then and there and neutralize His influence, which was really the issue with these prideful men. As Kent Hughes notes, "Those who rendered this opinion were 'scribes,' highly trained legal specialists sent out from Jerusalem to assay Jesus' miracles and see if Capernaum was a 'seduced' city. They apparently came with their minds made up, as there is no evidence of interviews with Jesus and his disciples."⁸ Was this a fair hearing? I think not!

II. Truth of the Gospel (3:22b-30)

Having revisited the particular groups of people that were a hindrance to Jesus' ministry to do the will of the Father, we now enter into a dialogue that Jesus has once again with the ever-defiant scribes. We sense a courtroom atmosphere with Jesus as it were on trial. We see the

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Mark*, vol. 1, 89-90.

⁶ Hiebert, 98.

⁷ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, 236; from Hiebert, 98.

⁸ Hughes, 90-91.

charge of guilt by the scribes, Jesus' defense of the charges, and then Jesus Himself rendering a verdict. In one of the many ironies we see in addressing the religious leaders, Jesus turns the attempt of the scribes to derail Him around on them. Where Jesus begins on trial, it is the unbelieving scribes who end up on trial.

1. The charge (vv. 22b, 35)

We have seen on no less than three occasions in Jesus' ministry His confrontations with demons (1:23-26; 1:34; 3:11-12). In each of these instances, the demons testimony as to the identity of Jesus was true. In Mark 1:24, the unclean spirit proclaimed, "I know who You are – the Holy One of God!" In Mark 1:34, Mark claimed, "they knew who He was." Then in Mark 3:11 Mark noted, "Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!'" On each of these occasions, their testimony of Him was true, even if it were mocking Him or out of a sense of despair and defeat. But even though their testimony was true, Jesus told them to remain quiet, "not to tell who He was" (3:11). Jesus' concern was that if He were to accept the testimony of these demons, then His enemies would consider Him to be in league with Satan.

But no matter how careful Jesus was to guard against this unmerited perception, we see that His enemies drew their own conclusions. Notice their charge against Jesus in our text. **"He is possessed by Beelzebul' and 'He casts out the demons by the ruler of demons"** (v. 22) and then in v. 30, **"He has an unclean spirit."** The obstinate scribes now viciously bring the very charge that Jesus went to great lengths to guard against. They believed Him to be in league with and possessed by Satan himself. Evidently, His own family agreed with the scribes to some degree. As we have seen, they wanted **"to take custody of Him; for they were saying, 'He has lost His senses"** (v. 21). His family was on the same warpath as the irreligious scribes, wanting to have Him arrested because they thought He was insane, maddened by the evil one himself. Of course, many in the crowds did not concern themselves with the how or the why that Jesus was empowered to perform miracles of healing. They were simply interested in the results.

The heinousness of this charge against Jesus cannot be overstated. Simply put, these people rejected the work of the Messiah. They missed the only person who could be their true Deliverer. Phil Newton exposes this scandal against Jesus in its severity,

They made the most serious accusation, that what Christ had done by the power of the Holy Spirit in testimony to His Messiahship, was attributed to be the work of the devil. We would call this scandalous and shocking! But the Pharisees felt no remorse in their words. They meant what they said. The clear revelation of Christ as the Messianic King, affirmed by the unmistakable healing and deliverance by the power of the Spirit, was totally rejected and declared to be of the devil.⁹

So the claim of the scribes was that Jesus performed these miracles, which they did not debate, not in His own power, but Satan's. He was demon possessed!

2. The defense (vv. 23-27)

We might have expected Jesus to retort rather viciously against these detractors. But He calmly defends Himself first by asking a question and then by using three parables that answer His question and that shows the absurdity of their deduction.

⁹ Phil Newton, <http://www.southwoodsbcc.org/sermons/matthew12c.htm>.

First, His question, **“How can Satan cast out Satan?”** The question itself shows the absurdity of their argument. If what they said was true, then Satan was actually trying to destroy himself and his realm.

Then His parables, which those who had ears to hear would clearly understand, demonstrate that division only weakens, never strengthens. His first parable, **“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand,”** is directed towards the accusations of the scribes. If Jesus was truly in league with Satan, then He and Satan were going about strengthening the kingdom in the wrong way. One only need read the history of civil wars to know how devastating it is on a country. Some of the most impoverished nations in the world are in the state they are because of civil unrest that in some countries is a way of life. They remain weak because of the havoc wreaked through division. If Jesus were in league with Satan, then they were weakening the kingdom in Jesus’ actions and not strengthening it.

His second parable speaks to His household, His family. **“If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”** Again, we can simply look at the plight caused by high divorce rates, unwed mothers, and homes that have a nuclear family intact but one in which the father and husband is missing in action because of his “commitment” to the work place. Or we can look at homes where the family is together at home but where fighting is the rule. While households in these situations might make it, they are weak and always battling just to make ends meet. This devastation is often handed down, when the sons and daughters of these homes begin their own families. Again, division only weakens, never strengthens. His conclusion, **“If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!”**

Jesus concludes with a self-evident parable in His defense. **“No one can enter the strong man’s house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder the house.”** This strikes to the heart of Jesus’ authority over **“the strong man,”** Satan himself. His miracles in casting out demons did not show that He was in league with Satan, but against Him. He was not at peace with Satan, but at war. His miracles demonstrated His authority over the realm of Satan and all of his minions. Only One who was stronger than Satan could free his victims from their bondage. And that is what Jesus had done – He had entered Satan’s house, invaded his realm, bound him, and had loosed these captive souls. Jesus’ defense against these claims by the scribe was self-evident to all of those who had any sense of logic about them.

3. The verdict (vv. 28-29)

Having silenced the scribes and his family on this occasion, Jesus now renders a verdict and gives a chilling warning. **“Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”** There is great comfort and encouragement in the first part of Jesus’ exhortation. **“All sins shall be forgiven the sons of men”** of course refers to those who truly repent of their sins. Every one of them, no matter how heinous they might be, will be forgiven if one repents – even blasphemy, a blatant, defiant irreverence of God. Even these obstinate scribes could be forgiven if they would repent of their sin.

But Jesus then refers to what is known as the unpardonable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is not taking the Lord’s name in vain, vile as that may be. It is not murder or atrocities against others. Even Hussein can be forgiven of his sins. It is not adultery or homosexual acts. There is forgiveness for Ted Haggard if he is truly repentant. So what is this unforgivable sin? Derek Thomas defines the unpardonable sin in this way, “The unforgivable sin of blasphemy

against the Holy Spirit is an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that He withdraws forever with His convicting power so that we are never able to repent and be forgiven.”¹⁰ This definition contains the warning given in Hebrews 6:4-6:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit,⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,⁶ and *then* have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones called this the most fearful texts in all of Scripture. The writer of Hebrews refers to one who has blasphemed the Holy Spirit, one who has seen and tasted the things of God and seen that they were good, and then have fallen away. It is the man or woman in the Church who knows the Scriptures, has heard the Word of God preached and proclaimed, has witnessed the power of God at work in the lives of others through changed lives, and yet rejects it all. It is more than unbelief. It is defiance of the goodness of God that the Holy Spirit has allowed them to see and to taste.

Of course, this warning from Jesus was geared towards these scribes, and perhaps some in His family, who were at the brink of this sin. They openly rejected the person and work of Christ in their midst. They were on the cusp of being **“guilty of an eternal sin.”**

Conclusion

1. We must not let conveniences hinder the work of the gospel.
2. We often expect opposition in our ministry from without, from those who do not believe our message. But opposition often rather unexpectedly comes from within, from those we would least expect it. Like Jesus, our families can sometimes be a hindrance to our gospel ministry. Even more tragic is when this opposition comes from the family of faith, the church.
3. It is common for one to ask the question, “Have I committed the unpardonable sin?” There is certainly nothing trivial in asking that question. Jesus indicates that it could be the most important question you ever ask. However, if you are asking yourself that question this morning, then you are the only one who can answer it. Do you treat Jesus, as the scribes did, as the ultimate evil in your life? Do you regard conversion to Christ and obedience to Him as Lord as the ultimate folly? Are you sensitive sin? Not the consequences of sin, but sin itself? Is the gospel foolishness to you? The unpardonable sin is marked by indifference to the things of God. Does that describe you this morning? Then seek the Lord, while He may be found!

¹⁰ Derek Thomas, <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/Derek's%20SERMONS/Mark/05amark.htm>.