

Christ The Judge

PRAY

Living with uncertainty can be deeply unsettling can't it.

As a teenage boy, my uncertainties surrounded my relationships with girls – would I find the one? Who would be the one?

Or the path I'd take for the future of my work. With so much riding on the decision, the uncertainty was uncomfortable.

As I've gotten slightly older, I've realised uncertainties persist!

Each time we have a baby, everything feels uncertain, and I can't relax until their safe arrival.

And heck, it doesn't even end after they're born! Their health, their future, their wellbeing is now our health/future/wellbeing!

If I'm humble enough to admit it, I can't even say I have certainty over the future of my job in ministry!

What if I burn out, what if it proves too challenging, what if I make a mess in my life, and disqualify myself from ministry.

In many respects, we live with uncertainty – because we can't say with 100% confidence that we know the future, and our place in it.

And sometimes, that uncertainty lies in the area of deepest importance in our Christian lives.

What of my future as a Christian?

Can I say with 100% confidence that I know I'll make it to the end? What if it proves too difficult, or challenging?

Sometimes it's not even as though I'm uncertain about the distant future, but right here, right now. Where do I stand with Jesus?

Am I truly a genuine Christian? Or have I somehow managed to convince myself and others that I am, and internally I have so much conflict over it all that I don't even know anymore.

I don't think it's all that uncommon for Christians to live with a fair bit of uncertainty. And today we read a verse that may only amplify this feeling. Have a look at 12:32

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.

We can wonder can't we, have I committed such a sin? What if I commit such a sin after I've become a Christian?? Is it possible for me to commit that sin in the future?

In our passage today, Jesus heals a demon possessed man, which provokes a few responses.

Some people are uncertain, unwilling to trust him, and some who are outright against him.

And Jesus delivers a series of teachings about what it means to be with him or against him.

And I think it helps us as we think about uncertainty as Christians.

PRAY

The first thing to see is that there is no neutral ground.

1. Neutrality is impossible

The context as we read is that Jesus has just healed on the sabbath, and the conflict between him and the religious leaders continues.

²² Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

They're asking if Jesus could be the Messiah - and way the question is phrased, they expect a negative answer, surely not!

Healings were meant to accompany the messiah, as Jesus had reminded John the Baptist not long ago, but people doubt, maybe because of Jesus reclusiveness, or because of his servant ministry.

In any case, the Pharisee's pull out the big guns.

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

He's not the messiah, he a servant of Satan. The gall!

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your

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

²⁹ “Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.

Jesus is not working in tandem with Beelzebul, he’s working in opposition, and dominating the fight. He’s got him on the ropes, and he’s not pulling his punches.

Jesus is the stronger man, who binds up the strong man, sapping him of his power, and plundering the captives Satan has taken.

But what if we’re taken captive again? Can this happen?

Even though sin, satan and death have been defeated, don’t we still live in an age of their death throes?

Like the writhing snake, that even though it is dead, may still lash out and strike?

I think people might come to this fear from the words Jesus says next.

³⁰ “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. ³¹ And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but 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.

Could I commit the unforgivable sin after I’ve been saved? And so, be recaptured by Satan?

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It’s worth slowing down here, and just doing some hard work on the text.

What even is blasphemy against the Spirit?

Why is speaking a word against the Son forgivable, but not speaking a word against the Spirit?

It’s a shocking statement isn’t it, when everywhere else in the Bible we hear of just how wide and gracious the span of God’s forgiveness is.

So Isaiah 1:18 says

¹⁸ “Come now, let us settle the matter,”
says the Lord.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.

And Micah 7

You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.

¹⁹ You will again have compassion on us;

you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

How is it now
that there is such a thing that will not be forgiven?

Some have interpreted this passage in Matthew to mean that sin before you are a Christian is committed against the Son, and is forgivable.

But blasphemy is committed by a Christian, when they reject God after they have the Spirit in them, and this is unforgivable.

Others have argued that blasphemy against the Spirit only applies within the life and ministry of Jesus, where the evidence of the Spirit's power could be clearly seen, and rejected.

But we best understand what this means when we think about it in context.

The pharisees have been attributing the work of Jesus to Satan/Beelzebul.
It's not because of ignorance or unbelief,
it's purely because they are contentiously disputing the indisputable.

Jesus is a threat to the pharisees power and influence, their identity, and so even knowing who he is they deny him. They attempt to win a crowd against him by making the most ridiculous claim that his power is from Satan!

They're denying the undeniable.

The difference between speaking a word against the son, and a word against the Spirit is not that the Son is less important, or that one is before you're a Christian and one after.

Rather,

I take it to mean that the first sin (against the son) is the rejection of the truth of the Gospel.
The second sin (against the spirit) is a rejection of the same truth, but in full knowledge that it is everything it claims to be.
It's the deliberate, wilful, persistent rejection of Jesus, despite undeniable evidence and the work of the Spirit.

One is to reject Jesus because you don't think it's true
The other is to reject Jesus even though you know it's true.

And for this, there is no forgiveness.

Is it possible to commit this sin after becoming a Christian?
Hebrews 3 says

¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.

Our past participation in Christ is only valid if we continue to share in it!

In John's letters he takes the same line, that those who leave the church show that they never really belonged to it (1 John 2:19, 2 John verse 9).

Hebrews 6 goes to show how close you can come to grasping, sharing, tasting the truth, before turning and leaving it behind.

I think each of these examples are of someone who is not a Christian, but comes oh so close, but shows themselves to have never fully participated in Christ by walking away.

The NT universally states that this type of rejection if persisted in is unforgivable. And so it is here in Matthew 12.

Jesus states that those who perceive his ministry to be empowered by the Spirit, and then for whatever reason - whether spite, jealousy, arrogance, ascribe it to satan - then they have put themselves beyond the pale.

In other words if you deny the very means of your own salvation you'll not be able to be forgiven.

So Jesus will say in vs, 30 - [Whoever is not with me is against me.](#)

This is a warning as to the danger of thinking you can remain neutral toward Jesus.

There is not such thing. Anything that's not a yes is a no by default.

Okay then, but what if you're not a Christian, can you do anything that would prevent you from ever being saved? I think yes, you can - by wilfully persisting in rejection of Jesus until you die.

That is the tragic reality of persistent rejection of Jesus.

Passages like this remind us that there's no neutrality with Jesus. You're either for him or against him.

Friend, if you're sitting here and you haven't decided to stand with Jesus yet, know that the longer you persist in that posture, the harder it will become to move.

I asked my grandfather on my wife's side a few months ago if there was anything stopping him from becoming a Christian.

He's in his 90s now. He said that there's no chance try change anything now, he's too old.

We know that you can never be too old to accept Jesus for who he is, and I've heard wonderful stories of people saved in very old age.

But it's also true, *humanly speaking*, that it becomes harder and harder to change as you grow older.

For Pa to change now, he has to acknowledge that he has been wrong for the past 90 years. He has to challenge 90 years of thinking down a particular path.

Don't wait so long to make a decision concerning Jesus. What will you do now?

And who knows, you may not have 90 years. God's patience doesn't last forever, and if you persist in rejection of Jesus till you die, you must hear the grave warning that this is unforgivable.

What if you have made the decision, but you're still plagued with doubt?

³³ "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

This is obviously stated negatively – Jesus sees that the pharisees hearts brim over with evil, but there's the positive on the other side of the coin.

Good is supposed to brim over from the good stored up.

Who knows what it looks like to have good or evil stored up in your heart – but I take it to mean that the things that spill over the rim of your life show what's deep down inside you.

The pharisees evidence themselves to be evil.

And if you're not so sure about yourself, ask yourself what do you brim over with?

What's filled up in your heart that your mouth can't help speaking?

What do people always catch you doing in your spare time?

Where do you find your thoughts drifting?

What's your default attitude to your wife or husband, children, parents, siblings?

Would your friends speak of you as generous? Good natured, patient and kind?

This can become a problem if these are the only things you're looking for to reassure yourself that you really are a Christian,

but it helps give you a snapshot of where you are doesn't it,
and even if you're failing at some points,
it just shows where you can grow,
and you can be assured that being saved is not based on these things.

...

Even still, uncertainty seems to linger around some Christians.

So some people look for spiritual sensationalism to know that they have a genuine relationship with God, that marks them out as someone who's been renewed and restored.

The pharisees demand something similar in the next verses, and I think Jesus words are helpful for us as he reminds us of the centrality of the cross.

2. The Cross is central

³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

Jesus miracles aren't enough, they want to see something that will undeniably convince them that he is the Messiah.

People still ask for this don't they! But even back then, as Jesus is walking around performing miracles, people still ask.

Still wanting some personal extra to fill a need they have. To make me feel spiritual and in touch.

³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here.

I take it to mean that Jonah was himself a sign. The Ninevites were somehow aware of Jonah's rebellion against God, and then deliverance, through the belly of the whale. And this was part of what brought them to repentance, as they received the message Jonah gave.

And just as Jonah, Jesus himself will be a sign, as he endures God's judgment on the cross, and goes into the heart of the earth, to be delivered through resurrection.

Jesus says, don't look any further than the cross for whether you think I am the messiah or not.

The Ninevites could recognise Jonah's preaching

The queen of the South could recognise Solomon's wisdom

And now something greater than both is here.

You want to know where you stand before God?

Don't look to sensationalism, and attempt to fill up your confidence that way.

The greatest demonstration of the Christ's power is in his death, resurrection and ascension.

You don't need to look any further beyond it.

Because again, there are only really two sides to fall on when it comes to the cross. Believe it, or reject it. No other sign is necessary.

And if you're not sure, work at it, because if Jesus didn't die and rise again, I'm going home – I wouldn't have bothered preaching today!

Go to Pat's explaining Christianity, or open house.

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Do you feel dried up, like work absorbs all of your energy, you're not sure you're a believer because by Sunday you're exhausted and can't bring yourself to engage properly.

Do you find that you just get more excited about some of the passions you have, and when you size up that passion against the zeal you have for Jesus, it's just... not there.

Do you sometimes feel emotionless as you sing the song, and wonder why your heart isn't more stirred?

Do you see some people at church, and they so obviously seem Christian, but you're not sure you could say the same of yourself?

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Take yourself back to the foot of the cross.

I stand amazed in the presence

Of Jesus the Nazarene,

And wonder how he could love me,

A sinner, condemned, unclean.

He took my sins and my sorrows,
He made them his very own;
He bore the burden to Calvary,
And suffered and died alone.

Oh, what kind of love is this?
You would die so I would live?
Bore the curse of all my sin —
Made your enemy your friend.

How marvelous! How wonderful!
And my song shall ever be:
How marvelous! How wonderful
Is my Savior's love for me.

Is that not your response to the cross?
Doesn't every part of you move to marvel and wonder at Jesus your saviour?

If that's you, you belong to Christ, and have beheld the greatest marvel in all human history.
To search for other proofs in your life to convince yourself that you're a Christian would be to stoop below the wonder of the cross.

It would be to sell out on the greatest sign that you can believe in.

And even if you're not fully there every day, and can only feebly, weakly, cling to the cross.
That's enough.

The cross remains the same, even if your emotional rollercoaster doesn't.

And your emotions aren't always the best indicator of your life as a Christian. They will come and go.

Instead, does the marvel of the cross spur you to be obedient to the father's will? To give your life, with some days being harder, others easier, but continuing to be shaped as a disciple of Christ.

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3. **Obedience is essential**

And I think this is what Jesus is driving at in verse 43.

⁴³ "When an impure spirit comes out of a person, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. ⁴⁴ Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that person is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

Stay with me!

I'm not saying that the impure Spirit is like a teenager who get's kicked out of home, only to come back later with all of his mates and trash the house with an epic party.

No, the house is the analogy of our lives.

When we meet Jesus, it's like our house gets a makeover – swept clean, some of it's beauty restored.

Without the house (which is our lives) reoccupied with a new inhabitant, the impure spirit returns and brings it's mates, and the final state of the house is even worse.

It's as though if you come close to tasting the goodness of the Gospel, and hear it's message of reconciliation, maybe even begin to marvel at the cross, but then walk away and say yeah nah it's not for me - that this is an even worse position to be in than before you began.

It's not that you're not interested because of ignorance. It's that you're not interested, even though you know.

And this is why I say, obedience is essential, following the recognition of who Jesus is, and marveling at the cross, and calling Jesus your saviour.
To have Christ sit in the seat of your heart's desire.

And obedience begins with occupying the house of your life with a new inhabitant! Affection and love for Christ.

Obedience can come from two places.

So for example, a child that is obedient because of threats is likely to push the boundaries, aren't they. To test the limits. And once they're out of home, all the stops come out.

But a child who loves and trusts their parents is far more likely to want to please them and honour them. Even when they're not under their parents roof.

This will be an obedience that lasts.

'The only way to dispose the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.' In other words, to bring about lasting change in the Christian life, our old sinful affections must be killed off by replacing them with deeper affections for Christ.'

Thomas Chalmers, 18th century, The Expulsive Power of a New Affection

And just take notice of the order of things. It's not as though obedience come before salvation. Like you've got to clean up your life before Jesus arrives, and then you're good to go.

Jesus sweeps the house clean – then we live in obedience to him.

That's why back in verse 33 Jesus didn't say "if a tree produces good fruit, then it's good" – he said, **make a tree good! And then it will produce good fruit.**

And if you're not convinced Jesus was talking about obedience, he makes it clear in the next verses.

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus has already spoken about the will of the Father in Matthew's Gospel, as he taught the disciples to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven".

And now again speaks of the will of the Father in Heaven.

Doing the will of the Father is inextricably related to living in the Father's kingdom.

A new citizenship given to you, based on the cross, received by faith, producing the fruit of obedience, because of the Spirit inside you, to love and cherish, and wonder and marvel, at what Christ your saviour has done for you.

Not only that, but to live a life that proclaims God's kingdom, as it is in heaven, here on Earth – that he rules, and he rules your life.

Our lives should be characterised by confidence in this kingdom, it's reality, it's victory, our status in it, our unshakable hope through the work of Jesus, our King.

And if we do have moments of doubt, we can quickly remind ourselves of the stronger man, who has plundered the house, who is greater than Jonah and Solomon, who has swept all sin and guilt and shame in the work of the cross, so that we can freely do the will of the Father.

Let me **PRAY**