

The Ugliness of Unbelief

Mark 3:22-30 ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons." ²³ So He called them to Himself and said to them in parables: "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ "And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ "And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. ²⁷ "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house. ²⁸ "Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; ²⁹ "but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation" -- ³⁰ because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."

A while ago, an atheist got onto my blog, and wrote the following comment: "The Bible is a hateful book full of outright horror at worst, and questionable "wisdom" at best. It condones slavery, the treatment of women as being of less value than men, and prejudice in all its various horrible forms. That you are choosing to build your whole life around this monstrosity is a tragedy. That you will be teaching your children and your flock that this earth is 6000 years old is ghastly."

What's remarkable about this atheist is that she used words like *hateful*, *horror*, *monstrosity*, *tragedy* and *ghastly*. By using those words, she was saying that her way of life was good and right and true and beautiful, and mine was horrible, tragically sad, and based on hate. What she couldn't understand was that her atheism gives her no basis to judge if something is good or bad, true or false. If there is no God, then there is no Law, no right and wrong, no true and false, just molecules, time, space and chance. To decide that slavery, chauvinism and so on is wrong, she first has to borrow some morals from religion to use to criticise religion.

But that is becoming quite fashionable these days. Atheists and unbelievers are claiming the moral high ground, claiming to be the reasonable, tolerant, broad-minded, ethical people, and it is the religious believers who are bigoted, immoral, unethical and narrow. Today, unbelief acts as if it is virtuous, clean, and beautiful. Unbelief now postures as scientific, tolerant and open-minded, ethical and liberal.

The Bible paints a very different picture of unbelief. When the Bible takes the lid off the container marked *unbelief*, the smell that comes out is an overpoweringly evil stench. When the Bible shows you unbelief, it looks nothing like what the atheist on the website was pretending to be.

In this section of Mark's Gospel, we see unbelief in all its ugliness. In the previous chapters, we have been seeing Jesus enter into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. They think He is a friend of sinners, a glutton, a blasphemer and a Sabbath-breaker. The more time they have spent with Him, the harder their hearts have become. Their unbelief has become deeper and deeper, until it explodes in this ultimate act of unbelief, which Jesus calls *the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit*.

This passage shows us the ugliness of unbelief. Through the action of the Pharisees, we see unbelief for what it really is. All the pretty make-up comes off, and we see a monster underneath. As Jesus encounters and answers these scribes, we learn of three aspects of unbelief.

I. Unbelief is Not Ignorance, It is Rejection v22

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons."

What no one can doubt is that Jesus is doing miracles. Both His supporters and His opponents

acknowledge that. But what His opponents have to do is find an explanation for His miracles that lines up with their hatred of Him. To them, He can't be doing these things through the power of God, otherwise they must believe in Him and He can't be from God if He heals on the Sabbath, He allows His disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, He claims to forgive sins, He does not support the traditions of the elders, He does not fast like they do.

So how then does He do those miracles? Satan does them through Him. He is actually a double-agent – pretending to do good, but actually working for the enemy. He is just baiting Satan's fishhook with miracles, He is just putting blocks of cheese on the Devil's mousetrap.

Now, are these scribes and Pharisees unbelieving in Jesus because they are *ignorant* of who He is, or are they *rejecting* who He is? Is their problem a lack of knowledge, or is their problem a lack of submission?

The Pharisees had now seen with their own eyes more miracles than most people will ever see. They had heard from the mouth of Jesus the best sermons the world will ever hear. They had questioned Him themselves and heard the answers. They did not lack information. Their unbelief was not ignorance; it was rejection.

They were not innocently mistaken about Jesus, they were deliberately refusing to believe Him. They were purposely rejecting Him and His claims with full knowledge of what He had done and said. Why would they do that?

Jesus told a story to explain why they did that:

Mark 12:1-12 *Mark 12:1 Then He began to speak to them in parables: "A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. ² "Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. ³ "And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ⁴ "Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. ⁵ "And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. ⁶ "Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ⁷ "But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' ⁸ "So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. ⁹ "Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others. ¹⁰ "Have you not even read this Scripture: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. ¹¹ This was the LORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes?'" ¹² And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them. So they left Him and went away.*

Jesus explains what's really behind their unbelief: they want to control what belongs to God. They want to be the bosses, not just the stewards. They want to own, not just serve. They don't want to be managers of God's people, they want to control them, and have the power, prestige and wealth that comes with it. Jesus is a threat to them.

John 11:47-48 *⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ "If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."*

Their unbelief was willing suppression. Their rejection was selfish agendas

Actually, this is how the Bible describes all unbelief. In Romans 1, Paul says that man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. The way dictators suppress any bad newspaper articles about

themselves, man suppresses the truth that God is our Creator and owner, and we owe Him our lives. Romans 1 says:

¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them...so that they are without excuse,

Just like the Pharisees had seen the miracles, and heard the sermons, so all people have seen the sun rise, and heard the thunder roll. We have seen the galaxies roll across our skies at night, and seen the exquisite beauty, artistry, and power of the Creator. The heavens preach the glory of God. Day after day, night after night, the message of God's existence and nature shouts upon mankind. Why doesn't he believe? Why doesn't he respond to God?

Because then, like the Pharisees, we would have to admit that Christ owns us, that we are just stewards of this life and body, that we owe Him obedience and thankfulness and trust. But like the Pharisees, the unbelief in any man says to God, we will not have this one to rule over us.

"The atheist can't find God for the same reason that a thief can't find a policeman."

Here is the ugliness of unbelief. Not ignorance of the beautiful Creator who has given us richly all things to enjoy. Not innocent ignorance. Not a mere mistake. No, wilful, purposeful, responsible rejection of Him as Lord over our lives.

The Pharisees' unbelief reveals something else about unbelief

II. Unbelief is Not Intelligent, It is Absurd v23-27

²³ So He called them to Himself and said to them in parables: "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ "And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ "And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. ²⁷ "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.

The scribes and Pharisees were learned men, the kind of men that the common Israelite feared to debate. These were men of letters, highly educated, having spent years reading, memorising, debating, and filling their heads with knowledge. So when they make a pronouncement, most people think it is going to be scholarly, intelligent. And here these men have given their scholarly, learned opinion of Jesus: He casts out demons by the prince of demons.

I wonder if Jesus wasn't shaking His head with half a smile when He replied. He shows them that their suggestion is not intelligent, it is absurd.

"How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided cannot stand." Simply put –Jesus was obviously reversing and countering what Satan did to people. Why would Satan empower Jesus to undo what he had done in the first place? That's making war on yourself. Why would Satan empower Jesus to free people that he had imprisoned? Do governments give tax exemptions to terrorists? Do businesses pay thieves to rob them?

Jesus points out another absurdity in their argument:

²⁷ "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house.

Jesus says that Satan is like a strong man who has held people captive. Jesus is like a rescuer, one who plunders the strong man's house. But you can only plunder a strong man if you are stronger.

To defeat the power and purposes of Satan, Jesus could not be under the power of Satan; He had to be over and above the power of Satan. To take people away from Satan's control, Jesus cannot Himself be under Satan's control.

Jesus is showing that their unbelief is not intelligent; it is incoherent. It is absurd, unreasonable, illogical.

Once the Pharisees had made a choice in their hearts to reject, to love their own positions more than God, it polluted their reasoning, and led these intelligent men to absurd conclusions. Remember those long algebra problems at school? If you made a mistake early in the sum, everything else would be wrong. So if you choose to reject God at the very beginning, all the reasoning, all the deductions after that will be wrong.

In January of this year, a scientist by the name of Lawrence Krauss published a book called "A Universe From Nothing" which, as the title suggests, is his explanation of how the universe came to be from nothing. Now think about that: here is a physicist with a Ph.D from MIT who is using his enormous I.Q. and considerable brainpower to explain why nothing produced everything. Krauss is an outspoken atheist, and here he begins with rejection, and reasons all the way to the totally absurd: no laws could produce all the laws, no matter could produce matter, nothing could produce everything. Krauss is a 21st century example of what happened to the Pharisees. Unbelief is not intelligent, it is absurd.

In that same chapter of Romans, Paul says that when man suppressed the truth, when he refused to be thankful, when he exchanged truth for a lie, then this was the result:

Romans 1:21-22 *but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools,*

Don't be taken in by the apparent intelligence of those who reject God. Don't be fooled by what sounds like research, facts, and objective studies. The Pharisees might have sounded that way too. The problem is, if you reject the very first principle of knowledge, you will get it all wrong after that. What is the first principle of knowledge? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Not rejecting God, but humbling yourself under Him. Accepting that He is Creator, worthy of glory and gratitude. He that comes to God must believe that He is.

The fool has said in his heart, there is no God. Unbelief is not intelligent, it is absurd. The unbelief of the Pharisees was not ignorance; it was rejection. It was not intelligent; it was absurd.

III. Unbelief is Not Insignificant, It is Insulting

After showing the absurdity of their unbelief, Jesus then says these words that have struck fear into the hearts of millions of readers.

It is now that he says:

"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; ²⁹ "but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation" -- ³⁰ because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Jesus says to them, every sin in the world will be forgiven, including the sin of mocking God, scorning God, profaning God's name. But here is this one sin which will not be forgiven: blasphemy

against the Holy Spirit. If you commit this sin, you will never be forgiven, and you will be condemned forever. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus actually says that if you speak against Him, the Son of Man, it will be forgiven, but if you speak against the Spirit, it will not be forgiven.

How had they done that? Where had they even mentioned the Holy Spirit? Look at verse 30 for the answer:

³⁰⁰ *because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."*

When the scribes and Pharisees said that the power within Jesus that was casting out demons was actually Satan, they were saying, the spirit within Him was unclean. And who was the Spirit that empowered Jesus, that authenticated Jesus? The Holy Spirit.

When people saw that man, that carpenter's son, caused the blind to see; the deaf to hear; the lame to walk; the lepers to be cleansed; the demon-possessed to be delivered; the dead to be raised; the hungry to be fed – when they saw these things – they were now seeing more than Jesus' humanity – they were seeing His deity, His divinity. They were seeing that He was not merely flesh, He was God in flesh. The Holy Spirit through Him was testifying - this Man is the Son of God, the only way to salvation.

When people saw the works of the Holy Spirit done through Jesus and attributed it to Satan – it was blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

This is what constituted the unpardonable sin. The unpardonable sin was attributing the verifying work of the Spirit to Satan, and rejecting the testimony of God the Spirit concerning God the Son.

Now let's speak for a moment on what this does *not* mean today.

There are many false teachers who promote their unbiblical, unscriptural ministries as biblical and normative. When they are challenged, they respond by saying, "Be careful! If you question my ministry, if you attribute my ministry to anything other than God, you're doing exactly what the Pharisees did when they said Jesus cast out demons by Satan – you're on shaky ground, you could be committing the unpardonable sin!" Uninstructed, nervous believers back off. After all, we don't want to commit the unpardonable sin by inadvertently criticising the work of God.

The end-result of this oft-used technique is that such false teachers keep their ministries beyond scrutiny, above criticism and forever self-justifying. Even the test of Scripture cannot be applied to their ministries for fear of blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Now this is completely false, for a number of reasons:

Firstly, we are told by the Bible to test the spirits:

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

Test the spirits. In other words, hold the sayings and actions of anyone claiming to be God's servant up to the bar of God's own Word. When someone is operating or speaking unbiblically, we have every right to shine the light of God's Word on that darkness. God the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Word of God, is not in one place of Scripture going to say – test the spirits, and then in another place say – don't ever question a ministry, you might be blaspheming Me. No, it shows that the meaning of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not related to questioning the validity of a ministry.

Secondly, we are warned that many false and deceiving spirits are out there, performing signs that could be mistaken as the Holy Spirit. This is the case now, and will be the case in the future:

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

Thirdly, Jesus Himself said that many who had operated supernatural ministries would not have been empowered by Him.

“Matthew 7:21-23 ²¹ "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²² "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³ "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

What about if someone really does have a ministry empowered by the Spirit and we wrongly attribute it to Satan? Isn't that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? The answer is no, it is not the same thing by any means. No matter how Spirit-filled we may be, we are never divine. So the situation is not parallel. Someone can reject the work of the Spirit in us and be forgiven, since we are sinful people, who often confuse the message with our lives. With Jesus this was not the case. He could not and did not sin. To reject signs performed through a perfect life had no excuse.

It is not the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit when you question the validity of someone's ministry, because no one has a ministry like Christ – walking on water, raising the dead, and no one is completely free from sin like Christ. We must question, we must test the spirits.

But the Pharisees were not testing, they were rejecting. They had seen more signs, more evidence that the King had arrived than any other people in history. But they refused to believe in Him. They rejected Him, they called Him Son of Satan instead of Son of God. This was the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

Think of how insulting this was. God has just poured out verification after verification. Prophecy after prophecy fulfilled before their eyes. Healings, miracles, signs, wonders that kept setting Jesus apart as unique, unprecedented, were God's unmistakable witness that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah. And what were they saying to that witness? “Not clear enough. Not how we would like it. We would like a sign on our own terms. We would like you to prove yourself to our satisfaction.” The Holy Spirit was in the witness box and testifying solemnly that Jesus is the Son of God, and they kept saying to Him – liar.

And that is where the danger lies for people today. While no one can blaspheme the Holy Spirit since Jesus is not amongst us as a man performing deeds in the power of the Spirit, we can again commit the sin of rejecting the testimony of the Holy Spirit regarding the Deity of Jesus Christ.

1 John 5:10 ¹⁰ *He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.*

Will rejection of Jesus' Deity be the unpardonable sin? Not exactly. We all begin by rejecting Jesus Christ at some point. But there is something worse than initial rejection.

Hebrews 10:26-29 ²⁶ For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was

sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

Sin wilfully in the book of Hebrew refers to apostasy – turning your back on Christ and rejecting Him as your Saviour and Lord. It is when people who had been exposed to enough truth to save them – to see that Jesus is the Son of God, and the only Saviour, and then they walk away and turn back to Judaism or atheism, or some other denial of Christ. This is an act of trampling Jesus underfoot and insulting the Holy Spirit.

This is no small thing:

2 Peter 2:21 ²¹ *For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them.*

Forty years after these events, God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed and the Temple to be destroyed. Just like in Christ's parable, God's anger over their unbelief came down in judgement. That's because their unbelief was not ignorance. It was not intelligent. It was not insignificant. It was wilful rejection, absurd and insulting.

So here is a possible response to the atheist who was on the website, using Mark 3 as a guide.

“Dear Atheist, You claim to be chasing truth, but in fact you are living in support of a lie – the ultimate lie – the lie that God does not exist, and that you owe Him nothing, and that He has no claim on you. Every day creation assaults you with His reality, but you suppress that truth. Every day your conscience calls you to live up to a standard, a standard that God placed there, and you refuse to acknowledge Him.

With that cataract of rejection in your eye, you keep finding things to support your lie – that the Bible is horrible, that science has the answers to ultimate questions, and that nothing happens to you after death. You find the absurd to be reasonable, and you find what is reasonable to be absurd. You will never find evidence for God as long as you call Him a liar. Slandering someone as a perjurer is not a good way to get to know someone. When you stop lying about God and stop calling God a liar, perhaps you will listen long enough to acknowledge what is in front of you.”

Rejection of God is not a mistake or a lack of knowledge. It is an immoral act of defiance. That's why we close with these words from Hebrews:

Hebrews 3:12 ¹² *Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God;*