

Welcome

The meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear powerplant in 2011 should never have happened. The powerplant was one of four constructed and operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Co. damaged in the 2011 tsunami that struck Japan.

Fukushima melted down because the tsunami washed over the complex, flooding the backup generators and tearing down powerlines. With no power, the pumps that kept the nuclear core cool shut down, and the reactor melted down. The disaster is considered the worst since the plant in Chernobyl melted down.

The problem with the Fukushima disaster is that, as multiple studies found after the fact, the TEPC had ignored multiple inspections, regulations and recommendations - including those from their own scientists.

In other words, the officials in charge of the plant had *plenty* of warning that, if they didn't make some serious changes, they were headed for disaster.

They chose to ignore those warnings... and... disaster struck. Like they were told it would.

Have you ever been there? You were told something was bad for you, but you did it anyway, and it blew up in your face. Or you knew a habit would get you in trouble, but you silenced that voice of reason?

We're going to talk today about how God works to rescue us from our sin. But faith is a relationship - God isn't going to force us to obey (then it's not obedience, it's compulsion). If we want life, we need to learn to hear God's voice - and listen.

God loves us. God wants good for us. God wants to save us from disaster. God is present to us as the Holy Spirit, so we're going to begin today by worshipping God, thanking God for giving us the Holy Spirit.

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, when we gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Easter night ended with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside. Jesus breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word "Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

Last week, we saw that the Holy Spirit is our ADVOCATE, God teaching us how to know God, speaking for us, praying with us. Making us look more like Jesus.

Last week, we met the Holy Spirit as the judge, the one who reveals to us what is right and wrong. And we're going to build on that. But we're going to get there a weird way...

Because we can't talk about the Holy Spirit without talking about the scariest thing about the Holy Spirit (and no, it's not that some people call her the Holy Ghost and Ghosts are scary). How many of you have heard that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin? I have a hunch if you grew up around church, you spent at least a little bit of time being afraid you had blasphemed the Holy Spirit.

The language comes from Jesus himself, and the warning is very clear:

I tell you the truth, all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences." -- Mark 3:28-29

I'm telling you - this verse has caused more spiritual panic attacks than this little passage here. Part of it is because whenever someone quoted this verse to me, they never bothered to define what counted as 'blasphemy'.

I would literally lie awake in bed at night and think to myself, "Don't blaspheme the Holy Spirit."

Which... you know what that did, right? If I say, right now, "Whatever you do, don't think about pink elephants," what did you just picture?

A pink elephant. STOP IT!

As soon as I told myself NOT to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, I would start thinking things like, "The Holy Spirit is so dumb. What a dumb person of the Trinity."

And *then* I would get all panicked that I had lost my salvation because I had committed the unpardonable sin and I would beg and plead with God to forgive me because I didn't really mean it.

This happened from the time I was eight until I was like 17.

I was a weird kid, no doubt, but the longer I pastor, the more people I meet who have been spiritually paralyzed by this question. They were told having long hair or listening to rock music or a particular sin was blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and - like me - they lived in a sort of spiritual paralysis.

And....come on... there are some pretty huge stakes here. A sin that CAN'T BE FORGIVEN!?

So... what is blaspheming the Holy Spirit? Well let's start with Blasphemy.

The word comes to us from the Greek, and means literally to hurt with words. It's synonymous to 'slander', but it has explicitly religious connotations.

In short, to blaspheme is to treat something holy as ordinary. To treat something special, set apart, Godly as just any old thing.

And Jesu says, "Look, you can blaspheme just about anything and God will forgive you, but to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is a sin that can't be forgiven."

Why did he say that? Well the next verse gives us some clarification:

He told them this because they were saying, "He's possessed by an evil spirit." -- Mark 3:30

Someone was saying Jesus was possessed. They were equating the Holy Spirit - the third person of the Holy Trinity - to a demon. Yeah, that definitely counts as blasphemy. And it's definitely not what I was doing as a teen. Doesn't have anything to do with rock music or long hair.

What does it have to do with? Well for that, we need to figure out who this 'they' is. So let's back up to the beginning of the story:

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon he and his disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. "He's out of his mind," they said.

But the teachers of religious law who had arrived from Jerusalem said, "He's possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That's where he gets the power to cast out demons." -- Mark 3:20-22

It's these teachers of religious law who claim Jesus is able to command demons because he himself is possessed by Satan. Now, why would these leaders make such a claim? Why do they care if Jesus is casting out demons? Aren't *fewer* demon possessed persons running around *good*, you know... as a rule?

Obviously, their opposition to Jesus has nothing to do with his miracles and everything to do with his teachings. If these leaders admit Jesus' power comes from God, then they have to follow his teachings, too. But they obviously don't *want* to submit to his teachings. So they have to explain his miracles away, too.

And the way to do that was to say that Jesus' power couldn't possibly come from God. But the Holy Spirit is God. So they were making ordinary - even demonic - something holy.

They're blaspheming. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

What is blaspheming the Holy Spirit? It's to recognize the Spirit's work in our lives and attribute that to something else - the universe, good vibes, bad vibes, coincidence, etc.

But....why is that the unforgiveable sin?

[Scripture Slide 2] For that, we need to listen to the letter to the Hebrews. This letter is actually a sermon that was preached to a congregation of Jewish Christians who were facing significant social pressure to abandon the way of Jesus and return to temple sacrifice. So they're facing some serious pressure to deny the resurrection life, the new life in the Holy Spirit. And here's what the preacher warns them:

It is impossible to bring back to repentance those who were once enlightened—those who have experienced the good things of heaven and shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the power of the age to come—and who then turn away from God. It is impossible to bring such people back to repentance; by rejecting the Son of God, they themselves are nailing him to the cross once again and holding him up to public shame.

It's impossible to bring people who have known Jesus, who have *shared in the Holy Spirit* and turned away back to repentance. Now, at first blush, this can sound like a passage about losing salvation - and once you've lost it, it's gone forever, like Heaven is a no reentry concert or something like that.

But look at the metaphor the author of Hebrews goes on to employ:

When the ground soaks up the falling rain and bears a good crop for the farmer, it has God's blessing. But if a field bears thorns and thistles, it is useless. The farmer will soon condemn that field and burn it. - Hebrews 6:4-8

The issue here is whether we're participating with God. Are we fertile soil? Do we allow God to till our hearts, break up what is stony and hard? Do we allow the seed of God's good news to take root in our hearts? Do our lives bear fruit? Or do we resist God's good work? Do we, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, turn our spirits away from God, closing our ears to the Spirit's voice?

If we do, how can we hope to be transformed?

And here's the real rub: last week, we saw that the Spirit is the one who convicts the world of sin, and what that means is that, like a light in the darkness, the Spirit shows us the way of Jesus.

But what happens if, when the Spirit shines light into our lives, we choose to close our eyes? We'll still be living in darkness, and then what can God do? God can shine all the light God wants into our lives, but if we refuse to open our eyes, we'll remain in darkness.

Friends, we want to act like the life of faith is a big complicated puzzle it takes multiple advanced degrees to crack. But it's not.

Jesus said, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor the same way you love yourself." That's pretty simple. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Not differential equations there. "Love one another the way I have loved you." Way easier than Shakespeare.

The problem isn't that Jesus' way is too hard to understand, it's that *we don't want to live like him*. We'd rather be afraid than bold. We'd rather be selfish than generous.

And so when the Spirit comes into our lives, breathes that new life of into us, shows us the light of Jesus' way, we act like those religious leaders. We close our eyes to the Spirit's light. Close our ears to the Spirit's voice.

We cut ourselves off from the source of new life.

So... yeah... it's *impossible* to be transformed without the Holy Spirit. It's impossible to breathe without breathing. It's impossible to be forgiven when you refuse the source of forgiveness.

It's impossible to see with your eyes closed. It's impossible to be transformed when you turn your back on the source of transformation.

I had a friend who was an atheist, and her first real exposure to religious folks was me and my friends. We debated faith all the time - always good-naturedly. And then she started coming to church with us. This was quite a while ago, and the church we attended did altar calls, where at the end of the gathering, the pastor would stand at the front and ask if anyone wanted to enter into a relationship with Jesus. One day she stopped attending with us, and I pressed her on why - she had been coming with us for several months.

Finally she told me what had happened: at the end of that last gathering she attending, she was feeling... *something*. So she took a risk: she prayed. She said, "God, if you're real, please prove it to me. Give me a sign."

As soon as she finished that prayer, the pastor said, "Someone here today is wondering if God is real. I want you to know God is real, and is ready to begin a relationship with you."

Now, I know that is something a lot of pastors who hold altar calls do. But this pastor wasn't one of those pastors. It was weird that he would say something like that.

When my friend told me this story, I pressed her a little - why didn't she respond to the sign? She shrugged me off and said, "It was just a coincidence." But I could tell from the way she responded she didn't believe herself.

Now here's the thing: I'm not the Holy Spirit. I can't say for certain whether that was a coincidence or not. But I *can* tell you that in that moment, my friend was experiencing the Spirit's call on her life. Inviting her to be transformed. And she refused the Spirit. She said, "Oh, it's just a coincidence."

Friends, that is what blaspheming the Holy Spirit looks like.

I know another person who heard his preacher speak about loving Muslims, even those who hate us. The preacher cited the story of the Good Samaritan. The man was furious, and met with the preacher. He insisted he didn't have to love Muslims because they were the enemy. The preacher shared Jesus' command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The man said, "I know I'm supposed to do that, but I don't want to." He left that church.

Friends, that is what blaspheming the Holy Spirit looks like.

I know in my own life, there have been plenty of times I've known the right thing to do and not done it. I've know what I need to do to listen to the Spirit - the Spiritual Practices that will make space for the Spirit to breathe new life into me. And I avoid them. Or I make excuses. I treat the Spirit not like my God, but like an option.

That's blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

And what about you, friends? What are the things you know God is calling you to do that you're ignoring? What are the things you're doing you know you shouldn't be? How are you avoiding the Spirit in your life? Or treating the Spirit like just another option?

When we blaspheme the Holy Spirit, we turn away from our source of life and light. God will not drag us into new life kicking and screaming. Will we choose, in faith, to follow the Spirit's path?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us. Will we come?

1. When in the last week have I done what I knew was right?
2. When did I ignore what I knew was right?
3. How can I say Yes to the Holy Spirit this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Fasting