

HOW TO GET HONEY FROM A ROCK
3rd in a Series on Difficult Sayings of Jesus called, “What Did He Say?”
Matthew 12:22-32

I know there are many people who want the government to take over the health care system. Honestly, I shudder to think of that idea. Imagine the IRS in charge of your medical care. Yikes. I recently went through a frustrating exercise with a monolithic government agency. In this case it was the Social Security System. I am due to get some benefits from that agency so a couple of months ago I decided it would be a good idea to get a running start at making sure those benefits start on time. I first tried applying on line. It seemed straightforward at first but I soon ran into a road block there. It told me there was a discrepancy between their records and the information I had entered, so I had to call them. I tried calling. Nightmare. The wait to talk to a human being was an hour! Forget that. I tried again a couple of days later. It was better, but still bad. It was 45 minutes. But wait, there was good news. I could leave my number and they'd call me back in an hour. I did that. A little more than an hour later a young woman did call. She was very nice. She walked through a long series of questions I had to answer to get the ball rolling. Then she said at last, “All right, almost done. There's just one more thing we need to do.” And she was gone. Somehow my call had been terminated. I had to start all over again. I couldn't face it that day, so the next day I tried again. Finally I got another woman who said, “Oh, actually we have a form you need to fill out. I will send it to you, you just fill it out, sign it and mail it back. Then in a few weeks you should receive a letter explaining exactly what you'll be getting.” Great. A few days later I received the form. I filled it out and mailed it back. Then I heard nothing for two months. I figured something had gone wrong, so as badly as I wanted to avoid it, I thought I had better call again. The problem with these calls is they have five minutes of notifications you have to wade through just to get to the automated menu. But I called. Again a 45 minute wait, but they could call back. So I had them do that. A young man called and I explained to him what was going on. He said, “Okay, I have your file, let me check into this. I will put you on hold, but I will be back.” I was sure he'd never come back. But he did. Then he dropped the bomb on me. He told me that I hadn't need to do anything, that I would automatically begin receiving the benefits without doing anything at all. All my time had been wasted!

Why didn't the first woman I talked to inform me of that? Or the second woman? Did neither of them, employees of Social Security, not know how their system worked? How frustrating to spend all that time in a totally futile pursuit that was utterly unnecessary. As I said, I envision going through that nightmare in regard to health care. Awful. Good thing we have a doctor in our family if that ever happens. But what I want you to think about is a worse possibility, and that is spending your entire life in a futile pursuit that is totally unnecessary. Sadly, that is

what most people are doing. Let's learn how we can avoid living futile, unnecessary lives. A strange story in Matthew 12:22-32 shows us the problem and how to avoid it.

JESUS MADE AN UNASSAILABLE CASE

At this point Jesus is aware that the leaders of his people have irrevocably rejected him. After a confrontation in which Jesus both displayed his power and showed how hypocritical the Pharisees were we see in verse 14 what resulted. "The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus." This wasn't about right and wrong, godly and ungodly, it was about their own position and their power.

More confrontations were to come, and this passage tells us about one that really exposed the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Verse 15 says that a large crowd was following Jesus and he was healing all who were sick. In this incident Jesus heals a man with multiple issues. He was demon possessed, blind and mute. Jesus healed him so that he could both talk and see. In addition, he dealt with the demonic possession problem. In our society the idea of demonic possession is mostly viewed as ancient superstition. But notice what takes center stage in the following discussion is the fact that Jesus was able to rid the suffering man from the demonic possession.

What we would find remarkable was that Jesus physically healed the man. He made a blind man see. This was not a trick, not like so many of the TV preachers who put on big shows in which they supposedly heal people, but they don't actually heal anyone with real issues. This guy was blind, and Jesus made him able to see. He couldn't talk, and Jesus made him able to speak. Today if we knew someone who was blind and someone miraculously gave them sight, we'd be blown away. That act would be the thing we would be impressed with. People were astonished at this event. Not some of the people. Matthew tells us "all of the people" were astonished.

People who knew this man, who knew he was blind and had been for a long time, brought him to Jesus. When that guy suddenly was able to see they were blown away. The word translated "astonished" literally meant "to stand outside." It was frequently used to mean to lose one's mind or to be terrified out of one's wits. In other words, these people were so dumbfounded at what Jesus had done they had no category for understanding it.

They started asking, "Could this be the Son of David?" The Son of David was the long promised and awaited Messiah. The common people, as you know, expected Messiah to be a great king and warrior, even greater than Israel's greatest king, David. However, they also believed he would bring in a new era where things like demon possession and blindness would no longer exist. They had a sense that he would have some divine power. What they had just seen Jesus do caused them to wonder if this Jesus could be this Messiah, the Son of David, because how else could you explain what had happened?

That was not acceptable to the religious leaders, who were determined to get rid of this Jesus. They had to put a stop to any speculation that Jesus was Messiah. So they discredited him, saying, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” Baal Zebul was one of the false gods of the Canaanites. The Jewish people had adopted that name in the form of Beelzebul as a euphemism for the prince of demons, or Satan. Notice that the religious leaders saw driving out the demon as the most powerful part of Jesus’ action. Some today might question the reality of demonic possession, and we don’t know how this demonic presence was manifested in this guy, but whatever it was, but Jesus’ causing it to stop was apparently more powerful and dramatic to the crowd than giving the man his sight.

Notice the reaction of Jesus’ opponents. They did not deny that Jesus had done a miraculous thing. They couldn’t deny it. Everyone could see what had happened. The man was demon possessed and all knew it, the man was blind, and everyone knew it, the man was unable to speak, and everyone knew it. And suddenly, the man could see, he could speak and he was normal, in his right mind, clearly not demon possessed. Jesus’ opponents could not claim it had not happened. They could not deny that Jesus had just demonstrated supernatural power by working a profound miracle. They had to admit he had power, so they decided their only option to discredit him was to claim that the source of that power was Satan. He healed this man by the power of Satan!

So, yes, he has power, no question about it. But where did that power come from? Their argument reminds me of the plight of poor baseball. Records are a big deal in baseball because of its long history. And unfortunately, two of its most cherished records are held by the same guy. Most home runs in a season, 73 by Barry Bonds in 2001. Most home runs in a career, 762 by Barry Bonds. There’s no denying Barry Bonds’ prodigious power. Yes, but where did that power come from? Everyone knows some of it came from performance-enhancing drugs, including steroids. That power was illegitimate because of its source. The opponents of Jesus could not deny his power, so they claimed something far worse than steroids were at work. This was Satan! In other words, Jesus wasn’t just wrong, he was evil.

JESUS’ OPPONENTS DENIED THEIR OWN BELIEF

Jesus answered his opponents with 3 arguments proving what they said made no sense. The first one is in verse 26. “If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?” Good question. Would Satan use power against himself? No.

Imagine a football game in which one team has a dynamic quarterback with a cannon arm and pinpoint accuracy. How do you defeat him? The best way is to pressure him, sack him before he can throw the ball. So he is dependent on his line men to block for him. Now envision that a couple of his linemen, instead of trying to block, turn around rush at him and tackle him! How effective will that offense be? They’ll be terrible! Such a thing would completely destroy

them. And so it would be if Satan went around throwing demons out of people he intends to destroy. As Jesus said, that makes no sense at all.

With his second argument Jesus really skewers his opponents. In verse 27 he said, “If I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?” Jesus was alluding to some of the beliefs of his opponents. They believed and taught that driving out demons is a godly thing. It takes God’s power to accomplish it. Some Pharisees claimed to be able to get rid of demons and said this proved God’s power, because if you cast a demon out of someone that shows God is with you and is empowering you. By their own doctrine, God had to be with Jesus and empowering him. At this point Jesus has checkmated them. They are now directly contradicting what they themselves taught and believed. If casting out demons is evidence of the presence and power of God as the religious leaders taught, and Jesus was casting out demons, then what does that say? God was with Jesus.

At this point Jesus had thoroughly discredited the opposition, but he didn’t stop there. He added one more log on the fire that burned them. He said in verse 29, “How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man?” That is obvious, isn’t it? Before I got married my house was robbed twice. I wasn’t there either time. I decided after that I needed to be ready in case a robber ever tried again and I was home. I’m prepared now. I have an IPD, an Improvised Protection Device, in case an intruder should ever invade our house. It’s an old hockey stick. Yes, I know, an old man wielding a hockey stick isn’t going to be much of a deterrent for anybody. Still, if you want to rob me you’re going to have to defeat me and my IPD.

Satan had a possession. It was that man. The only way you could take that possession away from Satan is to be stronger than he is. Who is stronger than Satan? No human being. There are no angels stronger than him. Who does that leave? It leaves God. God is the one being who can subdue and defeat Satan and take his possessions away. The point is made and seconded. Jesus freed that man by God’s power.

Then Jesus made that enigmatic statement, “Whoever is not with me is against me.” What does that mean? Actually it is profound, but simple. He is saying he forces a choice on everyone. There is no middle ground. There is no abstaining. You are either with him or you’re not, and if you’re not, then you are rejecting him. Some people would have wanted to take the agnostic position. I don’t know who he is. Just leave it there. Jesus denied that option. You’ve come to a fork in the road. You must choose. You can either take the right fork or the left fork. There is no middle. The right fork is the Jesus road. The left fork is the not Jesus road. If you do not take the right fork, by definition you are not on the Jesus road. You must decide. We all must.

That brings us to the part of this passage that makes some people uneasy. Jesus says in verse 31, “Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” Uh oh. There’s a sin that will not be forgiven. Oh no. I hope I haven’t committed that one. This one idea creates stress and fear for many people of faith. Probably because our son is a doctor Laurie and I have been watching lots of medical shows on TV. Toby scoffs at them because they are so unrealistic, but we watch 3 of them. Of course, on the shows they have to throw in rare and even bizarre cases, because how interesting would it be to watch week after week of flu like symptoms, back problems, gastrointestinal problems and cardiac events that are the usual parade of patients in a real ER? That’s where we run into problems. They have a patient with some rare condition they have to diagnose and then treat. And I start thinking, “I bet I might have this! I think I’ve had those symptoms!”

Of course that is driven by the fear that lurks inside us that we have some hideous disease that is about to manifest itself and take our lives. We have a tendency to have a similar fear in the spiritual realm. We hear about an unforgiveable sin and we start to worry that we’ve done it. This is exacerbated by Jesus’ saying that this sin is “blaspheming against the Spirit.” Yikes! What does that mean?

Blasphemy isn’t a word we commonly use. It sounds kind of violent to me, I guess because it starts off sounding like the word “blast.” What in the world is blaspheming against the Spirit? If we don’t know what it is maybe we did it and didn’t even know it, and so we are forever condemned because it can’t be forgiven! Calm down. The word “blasphemy” originally meant “abusive speech.” It was used of the strongest form of personal mockery. So to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to mock him, to verbally abuse him.

The Pharisees were doing something worse than not believing in Jesus. They knew, by their own doctrine, that he was exercising divine power. The Holy Spirit was working powerfully through Jesus and it was evident to all, including them. They not only rejected that, they labeled it the work of Satan. They called the work of the Holy Spirit evil! How can one ever be rescued when one does that? It is the work of the Holy Spirit that is essential to our rescue. If a person is calling that work evil, there is no way that person will ever be saved.

Jesus said, “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.” That’s interesting. You can mock him, reject him, and still be forgiven. That proved to be true. There was a man who hated Jesus. He thoroughly rejected and despised him, and he did everything he could to oppose everything pertaining Jesus. He said terrible things about Jesus. He rained violence on the followers of Jesus. His name was Saul, also called Paul. In 1 Timothy 1:13 he said, “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.” He spoke against Jesus. But he was forgiven. After Jesus confronted him he put his faith in Jesus. In that verse he goes on to say, “I was shown mercy.”

But suppose when Jesus had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul realized who he was, and he not only rejected him, but he called his appearance the work of Satan. At that point there would be no forgiveness for Paul because there was nothing more that could be done for him. That would have been blaspheming the Spirit, and it would have been forever fatal.

In verse 38 we see how far gone the Pharisees were. “Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.’” Wait. The discussion they just had was about an undeniable miracle, a sign, performed by Jesus. And now they say, “Show us a sign”? Are you serious? Jesus responded in verse 39, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!” In other words, can you believe this? A bunch of blasphemers who are so far gone they call the work of the Holy Spirit, a work they cannot deny, a work of Satan. And now they ask for another sign! Sheesh! No matter what Jesus did, they would call it evil. So he says, “No soup for you.” Well, actually he said, “I’m not going to give you a sign, except for the sign of Jonah.” That was a reference to his resurrection.

IMPLICATIONS

DON'T FREAK OUT ABOUT THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN

Remember the example of Paul. He rejected and maligned Jesus as thoroughly as anyone ever has. And God forgave him for every single bit of that. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul wrote, “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Then in verse 11 he said, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” What a group. Idolaters, adulterers, thieves, swindlers, greedy, and all the rest. But they were forgiven. None of the things they had done were unforgiveable.

The unforgiveable sin is not merely rejecting Jesus. One can reject Jesus, and at the very end of life put faith in him and still be forgiven. The unforgiveable sin goes well beyond that. The Pharisees had been given proof that Jesus was divine. Their own doctrine declared he was from God. But rather than admit that, they called the power Jesus had displayed, Satanic! The Holy Spirit was showing them, convicting them of the truth about Jesus. Not only did they reject that truth, they called it demonic and evil.

There is only one way anyone ever comes to faith in Jesus Christ. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit. It takes a miracle by the Holy Spirit to make all of us who are dead spiritually come to life. If you not only reject that work but claim that it is Satan at work and therefore evil, there is no hope. You label as evil the only thing that can ever bring forgiveness. That is the unforgiveable sin.

Imagine you are diagnosed with hypokalemia, which is lack of potassium. Your body needs potassium. If you don't have enough you can suffer muscle cramps, fatigue, kidney problems, it can alter your mental state, and lead to arrhythmia. It can be dangerous. Suppose that bananas are the only source of potassium. But you have decided bananas are evil, that you will never touch one. You are in a hopeless situation for you are calling evil the only thing that can save you. That is what someone who blasphemes the Spirit does.

People who commit the unforgiveable sin don't ever concern themselves with it. If you ever have a moment of fear that you might have committed it somehow, rest easy. The very fact that you wonder about it tells you that you have not committed it. If you were committing it you would not even wonder about it.

Colossians 2:13-14 says, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." How many of our sins has God forgiven? All of them. All of them up to the point where I put my faith in Jesus, right? So now the meter is running again. Is that how it goes? No. All of our sins are forgiven. Every single one in the past, no matter how ugly, every one you are committing today, and every sin you will ever commit for the rest of your life. All of them, without exception, are forgiven forever!

Ephesians 1:4-5 says of God, "he chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ." He predestined us to be his children. When did that happen? Before the creation of the world! Do you think you're going to mess that up?

When you put your faith in Jesus you became a child of God. Yes, but I keep messing up. Um, does messing up mean a child no longer is a child of its parents? A couple of weeks ago we took care of our granddaughters. Ella had a bad night the night before and didn't get enough sleep. By the end of the day she was extremely tired. She sometimes becomes irrational, even difficult and very emotional when she is overly tired. Laurie wanted to make her dinner, but she didn't want to eat. Nothing would make her happy. Finally Laurie suggested a quesadilla. Yes, Ella decided, a quesadilla would be good. Laurie made her a nice quesadilla but when she set it in front of her Ella became nearly hysterical. She could hardly speak because she was crying so much. She finally got out, "There's cheese on it. I don't want cheese." She wanted a quesadilla with no queso. I guess that's a "dilla." Well that's just a plain tortilla. Fine, Laurie got her a tortilla. More tears. What's wrong now? It's too big. Laurie cut it down to satisfy her. She did make it through dinner, but that was kind of how things went all the way to bed time. Here's the question: did her behavior in any way call into question the fact that she was Toby and Anna's child, or our grandchild? Absolutely not. Nothing will ever change that. She is

their child, and our grandchild, no matter what she does, and will be forever. And so it is with God's children who have been destined to be his children since before the creation of the world. So, child of God, no, you have not committed the unforgiveable sin. Rest easy.

DO LEARN FROM THE CAUTIONARY TALE OF THE PHARISEES

So we don't need to fear this unforgiveable sin. But that doesn't mean this passage has nothing to teach us. There is a powerful lesson for us in the example of Jesus' opponents. What happened in their lives that got them to the place where they did commit that sin?

What would have happened if Jesus' opponents had actually done what their own teaching demanded and acknowledged that Jesus was exercising divine power. They would have been admitting that Jesus had divine power that they themselves did not possess. Who were people going to follow after that? Obviously people were going to follow Jesus rather than them.

Remember that Jesus' signature speech, the Sermon on the Mount, was a direct attack at the religious leaders of Israel. In it He powerfully showed that they were proud, self-righteous, hypocritical, greedy and that they rendered tortured interpretations of God's revealed truth that enabled them to justify their hypocritical lives. In other places Jesus warned people to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" and told them not to follow them. He said they were blind guides leading the blind. At times he called them a bunch of snakes and whitewashed tombs that looked nice on the outside but were full of death on the inside. To admit the truth about Jesus would have meant admitting he was right about all of that!

If they admitted Jesus had divine power they would have had to acknowledge that he was telling the truth. It would have been humiliating for them and would have stripped them of their status. There was no way they were ever going to do that. They wanted to be respected. They wanted to be thought of as the most knowledgeable, wisest leaders in the country. They wanted the position of respect that they had and the financial rewards that came with it. If they admitted what was obviously true about Jesus they would have had to give up all of that. Their careers would be over.

The Pharisees had something they wanted more than they wanted the truth of God. They wanted the image, the position, the respect, the power and the money that came with being the respected religious leaders. And they wanted it more than they wanted God's truth.

I don't imagine that they went through a conscious analysis of the situation before arriving at a decision to reject Jesus. I suspect it was more instinctive than that. Deep down we all have things that are of utmost importance to us. Sometimes we aren't even conscious of what those things are and how important they are to us. But we protect them fiercely. If we feel like they are threatened, then we bare our teeth and prepare to fight. I think that's what happened with the religious leaders.

In the end there was something more important to them than knowing, honoring and serving God. This is where this incident connects with *our* lives. What is most important? Is there something in our lives that is more important than knowing, honoring and serving God?

Psalms 81 reminds us of this problem. It was written to Israel to warn them not to worship foreign gods, which they were doing. They did it because they thought those fake gods would give them abundance and security. Once again you can see the same problem the Pharisees had. They wanted abundance and security more than they wanted to honor and serve the true God. They were sure this is what they needed most of all. So if they thought worshipping other gods would give it to them, they would do it, even if God commanded them not to. Verses 11-12 say, “But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.” That is exactly what happened to the Pharisees. They wouldn’t listen to the Lord. So he gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.

In verse 13 the Lord says, “If my people would only listen to me. If Israel would only follow my ways.” What would happen? He would defeat their enemies. Then he would bless them. In verse 16 he says, “But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.” Wheat was and is today a staple of life. “That’s my concern. God will give me wheat and that’s not good, you see, because I’m gluten intolerant. God’s going to make me sick.” Somehow God didn’t seem concerned about that, probably because people didn’t used to be gluten intolerant. But let’s not get sidetracked by that. What God was promising was the “finest.” They would get honey from the rock.

That’s interesting because honey doesn’t typically come from a rock. Why did he say that? I think he’s saying in dry, hard places, in places where you would never expect it, God would give honey. Honey was the sweetest thing they knew back then. They didn’t have apple pie. They didn’t have jelly doughnuts. They didn’t have molten lava cake. They didn’t have See’s candy. They had honey. God promised that even in difficult places he would give them the sweetest thing they knew at the time.

He said, in fact that he would satisfy them with it. The noun form of the Hebrew verb translated “satisfied” meant “fullness.” It had the idea of being sated, having all you could ever want or need. That is what every human being is looking for. We want a life in which we are satisfied. Unfortunately we are typically convinced that there is something we must have to gain that fullness, that satisfaction. If we want that more than we want to honor and serve God the end result will inevitably be disappointment and spiritual disaster. God promises the satisfaction, honey from the rock, comes from listening to his voice, from knowing him, serving him more than anything else in life.

CONCLUSION

ASK YOURSELF WHERE YOU THINK SATISFACTION IS FOUND

The problem we have is very often we are driven by motives we are not very conscious of. We do not even know that down inside we feel there is something we must have to find satisfaction, and that is more important to us than knowing and obeying God. You can usually get a clue to what that is from your reaction when something is threatened. It is important for us to be clear on where we think satisfaction is found because we will pursue it. And if it is in something other than the life that comes from knowing and serving God, we will pursue that thing above knowing and serving God. The result will be at best, our lives will end up futile, spent in the pursuit of that which is unnecessary.

TRUST THAT SATISFACTION COMES FROM THE LORD

What can deal with the emptiness, the loneliness, the sadness of this world? There is only one thing that can heal that wound, and that is knowing God. If we recognize this, if we trust him to satisfy us, then we will be truly filled.

A little over 30 years ago there was a young missionary couple, Bob and Pam, who longed to have a child. They prayed earnestly for a child, and when Pam became pregnant they were truly thrilled. Having a child seemed the thing they needed for satisfaction, and now they were going to get it. But during the pregnancy Pam contracted amoebic dysentery from the water in the area where they were serving. The doctors had to give her some strong medication to save her life. Unfortunately the medicine was known to cause irreversible damage to an unborn child. At best the child would have devastating disabilities. The doctors advised them to abort the pregnancy. What a terrible situation. If she kept the baby their lives would be changed forever. It would mean an extremely difficult life for the child, and for the two of them. How could they be satisfied going through a life with all the pain that would come from that? It tore them up, but they believed that God loved that baby and saw its life as precious and holy, no matter what deficits the child might have. They believed that satisfaction is from the Lord. And so they choose the hard way. They gave up what they believed was quality of life for them and for their baby to serve God. In 1987 Pam gave birth to a baby boy, and they named him Timothy, which means, "one who honors God." And that boy has. He turned out to be, against all odds, perfectly healthy. By the way, their last name is Tebow. Maybe you've heard of them. Their son has lived a life honoring God.

For the Tebows, the circumstances proved joyful. It will not always be so. But they made the choice to want to honor and serve God above anything else in life when they thought it would bring great pain and hardship. They did it because they believed satisfaction comes from God.