

We are living in a time when the public discourse can seem manipulative at best and untruthful at worst. Many Americans distrust the current political discourse and the news media. Republicans and Democrats don't seem to be able to listen to each other because they are pitted in a battle that neither side can really win, and that's because as long as self-interest is more important than the good of the whole, our fear of finding ourselves on the losing end of things will keep on fueling a fear-based attitude of distrust of the other. How much of what we read and hear seems biased? How much of it seems to ridicule the other side? How many of us trust what our elected leaders say? Has the truth of our word been eroded? False has become true, and truth has become false, as partisans affirm their own alternative facts. Is there any way out of our political predicament?

Jesus had harsh words for those who called evil good and good evil. He lambasted the Scribes for accusing him of using evil to cast out evil. Everyone had heard about Jesus' power to heal and cast out demons. There were only a few conclusions to be drawn: 1. Jesus was who he said he was and it was the power of God at work in him to heal. 2. Jesus was off his rocker—a crazy religious lunatic. 3. Jesus was evil and a threat to society because discourse like his was going to throw everything into chaos and change the basis on which their whole culture was built. Jesus is risking chaos, the authorities believe, by challenging established understandings and long-held beliefs about things like the Sabbath, table hospitality, and religious practices.

Jesus' family want to protect him, so call they him crazy and go out to grab him and haul him inside, away from the view of the crowds. They are essentially trying to do an intervention. They were ashamed of him and afraid for him. In their society, "if the shame is particularly egregious it can require the death of the one who caused it. For example, a rapist deserved death (see 2 Sam 13), but his life could be spared if the family declared him crazy."<sup>1</sup>

The Scribes want to discredit him and destroy his reputation, so they call him evil. They want to change the narrative and discredit Jesus. They call him names. "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." The purpose of these labels is to identify him as deviant. They had worked hard, studied long, and prayed fervently for understandings of God's will that will maintain a kind of order even in violent and brutal times. Jesus threatened all that. Crowds were flocking to him. They had heard reports about Jesus' healing miracles came to see for themselves.

Word had gotten out: Jesus had healed many people. Now everyone who had something wrong was pushing and shoving to get near and touch him. There were so many people trying to get to Jesus that he couldn't even go home to eat. The crowds saw hope in Jesus. They had heard that he healed those who were suffering and had freed people from evil, and they wanted that for themselves.

I can imagine that Jesus could have felt overwhelmed by so much suffering all around him, pressing in on him from every side. I can almost imagine the tension in the pit of his stomach and his shallow breathing as he faced the fear and hope of the people around him. I can imagine how the ridicule of the Scribes and the embarrassment of his family might have been enough to want to hide from it all and disappear. But he faces all of them and turns their words back onto them by asserting that his true family are those who do the will of God, and that the only evil being committed there that day was that good was being called evil.

Jesus says, "people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"

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<sup>1</sup> [http://liturgy.slu.edu/10OrdB061018/theword\\_cultural.html](http://liturgy.slu.edu/10OrdB061018/theword_cultural.html)

The word Blasphemy means to shame another person by outrageous verbal insult. It means denying God's activity and attributing it to an evil spirit. Lest we think that the power of evil is reserved for back in Bible times, even today evil still hold us captive whenever anything other than God becomes our focus. When powers like racism, distrust, fear, gun violence or consumerism rule our individual and collective lives, we are being held captive by evil.

The unforgiveable sin was about calling the source of all goodness evil. There is no way to live in a world where good and evil are confused with one another. How could anyone make choices about life if they can't differentiate between good and evil? Being able to know the difference and call it is how we can do justice and love. Even if we decide to avoid the decision and keep quiet, we are only being complicit with evil if we stand by and say or do nothing when it shows up. When we say and do nothing about what we learn of injustice, we are helping it spread.

Should any of us be worried about committing the unforgiveable sin?

No. God knows our hearts. Lapses in judgment; inaction because of fear or the delusion that we can't really make a difference; or doubt and uncertainty about what we believe are not unforgiveable. Let's not forget the first part of that verse: "people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter. Jesus wasn't talking to people who were hoping to find God's grace in their lives. He was talking to people who knew they were right and who would not allow anything to challenge that rightness.

Our world needs our voice as Christians. People are lonely and afraid, even angry. We all could use Jesus' words of compassion and hope. He is urging us to speak them to each other, these words of compassion and hope—urging us to listen and empathize without needing to justify our own point of view. Jesus is telling us that we don't have to settle for the acrimonious public discourse. Jesus is freeing us from all that and giving us another language and another way. He shows us that loving our enemies first means understanding them and understanding them means listening, and in order to listen we have to get close enough to be touched and even moved. We don't have to agree or defend our own position. We just need to cross whatever divide is keeping us apart and let Jesus stand in the breach, empowering us to cross the divide and just listen. Amen.