

The Ultimate Failure
From the Series, “Faith, Followers, and Failures”
By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

If you follow winter sports, you know about of ski jumping. It’s fascinating. You’ve seen it: A skier starts at the top of a very high ramp, they travel down until they get to very high speeds and then they release off into the air. If everything works according to plan, the result is a wonderful combination of freedom, power, and grace. That has to be a great feeling.

Way back in 1970, there was a ski jumping competition in a place called Oberstdorf, Germany. A young ski jumper named Vinko Bogataj joined in. The weather was not good that day, but he bravely started down the ramp. Sadly, somewhere along the way, something went very wrong. Instead of launching gracefully into the air, Vinko slid off the side of the ramp - He did so in a spectacular way. Fortunately, he suffered only a minor concussion and went on with his life.

However, the event was caught on film. Over in the US, a producer from ABC TV network decided to use it in the opening of a show called, “ABC Wide World of Sports.” It sounded something like this: “ABC - Bringing you sports from all over the globe. The thrill of victory. The agony of defeat.” Vinko was the “agony of defeat.”

Overnight, Vinko Bogataj went from being a hobbyist to a celebrity. Only, he wasn’t famous for his victories - He was famous because of his failure. ABC news showed this clip at the beginning of their “Wide World of Sports” show every week for the next 30 years. During that time, this man became the symbol of ultimate failure. Now, for Vinko, that wasn’t so bad. It got to the point where famous people asked for his autograph.

We’ve had a little fun here, but we’re doing this to introduce a very serious topic. It’s one thing to be the ultimate failure in sports. It’s another thing if we’re dealing with higher realities.

We’re continuing our series, “Faith, Followers, and Failures.” In this session, we’re going to discuss: The Ultimate Failure. Let’s read about it:

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?” (Matthew 12:22-24)

What’s happening here? For a long time, Jesus has shown his incredible, supernatural power through all kinds of miracles. He’s healed people from devastating illnesses. He’s freed people from bondage to demonic possession, and more. In this text, Matthew reports that Jesus does something more complex than ever. A man comes to him with an extreme case. He’s blind **and** mute **and** demon possessed. So, he’s not just sick to the point of being handicapped. He’s not just demon possessed. He’s both. Jesus, as he has done numerous times in the past, heals him.

To use a sports illustration, this is like the gymnast who does an amazingly complex move. They combine a back flip with twist and land on a balance beam without flinching. Then, they stop for a second to pose - All with full control and grace.

Jesus performs this miracle in front of a large crowd, as he has done many times in the past. This is added to countless reports of him doing similar things on other occasions. To any honest observer, it's obvious that this is happening with supernatural power. There's no rabbit hidden in a hat. There's no cards up a sleeve. There's only one explanation, and that's divine power.

The crowd understands this. We're told they are "astonished". The idea here is that they're just about knocked off their feet. Their breath is taken away. And so, they ask: "Could this be the Son of David?" That's another title for the Messiah.

The religious leaders are watching all of this. They're got a dilemma on their hands: They don't want to believe in Jesus. They have decided this. No amount of evidence is going to change their minds. And worse, they're watching Jesus convince the crowds. That could mean that the religious leaders are going to lose hold on their power. To them, that's all-important. So, they have to do something. And they have to do it fast. What they do is very sad:

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." (Matthew 12:24)

The name Beelzebul is another name for Satan. The Pharisees have suggested this in the past (Matthew 9:34), but now they're getting loud.

Here's what the Pharisees should have done if they were serious about finding the truth. They're confronted with a man who looks like the Messiah. That's important. Under Jewish law, any important matter is to be investigated. At least two witnesses are required establish the truth in a matter. Well, there's a whole crowd here who witnessed an important miracle, including members of the religious leadership. These men could not discredit Jesus based on the facts. Clearly, something supernatural has happened.

The Pharisees should have stated that Jesus presented evidence that he could be the Messiah. Then, they could have investigated further. Here's what they did instead: In those days, people believed in only two sources for supernatural events. One was God. The Pharisees didn't want to admit that. The other was the Devil. The Pharisees decided to say that the Devil was the source of the miracle.

Notice, this is not based on any facts. This is not based on the results of a careful investigation. Nevertheless, the Pharisees are stating this as though it were a fact. They have made their decision based only on their prejudice against Jesus. How does Jesus react? Let's read on:

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? (Matthew 12:25-26)

Once again, Jesus knows the thoughts of men. More than that, he knows the hearts of the people making charges against him. So, he knew what was happening.

Jesus Responds to the Pharisees

He responds with two arguments. The first is based on reason. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. In other words, Jesus is asking, “Is Satan like the Three Stooges?” We’ve all seen cartoons where people work against each other. Let’s say one starts in one place digging a hole, another person starts another hole a few feet away. The first gets a shovel full of dirt and throws it over his shoulder without looking. It falls into the other guy’s hole. The other guy does the same. When they figure out what’s going on, they get into a fight. It’s very comical.

Is Satan like that? Is Satan stupid and disorganized? Do his forces fight each other? Jesus says, “no”. Satan is very smart and very organized. Demons don’t possess someone and then get kicked out by another demon. If that happened, Satan’s kingdom would fall apart. In fact, it would have fallen apart long ago. So, that’s not what’s happening here.

Then, Jesus gives a second argument:

And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?
So then, they will be your judges. (Matthew 12:27)

Apparently, there were people in the days of Jesus who drove out demons. Jesus calls them “your people”, so they must be Hebrews. Exorcists in that day would use incantations based on the Scripture that they knew at the time. It seems that God, in his grace, gave some people the ability to help when demons afflicted people. These people did not do their work with the ease and power that Jesus did, but they appear to have been sincere and at least partially effective.

Here’s the point: Apparently, no one had any trouble with any of them. So, Jesus says, you can’t arbitrarily condemn him, but fail to address others doing something similar.

Then, Jesus drives his points further:

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. (Matthew 12:28-29)

When the Pharisees were confronted with the supernatural power of Jesus, and they needed to identify a source, they had a choice of God or Satan. They chose Satan. Jesus says, "Now that I have eliminated Satan as a choice, only the Spirit of God remains." So, the Spirit of God is empowering Jesus to overcome Satan.

Jesus then adds an amplification: "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man?" Jesus says yes, Satan is powerful - very powerful. Also he's a thug who steals things and hurts people. But someone stronger than Satan is here. Because Jesus is strong, he can bind Satan. That's what allows Jesus to then take back what Satan has stolen.

Having confronted the Pharisees and having beaten their arguments, Jesus now warns them:

"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." (Matthew 12:30)

Jesus warns these men: Stop playing around! This is serious. You need to decide. Jesus says, you're either helping him, or you're fighting him. You're either gathering the lost sheep into the kingdom, or you're scaring them away. This is a constant theme in the gospel accounts of Jesus: Everyone needs to choose.

The Failure

In the groups of faith, followers, or failures, the Pharisees have failed miserably. In fact, their failure was the ultimate failure. Jesus explains why:

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. (Matthew 12:31-32)

How badly did the Pharisees fail? They failed so badly that they were in danger of being past forgiveness.

This is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. It's often referred to as "The Unpardonable Sin." Because it's misunderstood, lots of people worry that they might have done this. So, let's spend some time here so we can understand what Jesus is saying.

This is Serious

How serious is this? Serious! One of the most important reasons Jesus came was to die for the sins of the world. He came so that God could offer forgiveness to you and to me. Jesus says here that all kinds of things can be forgiven. This includes speaking against him.

However, Blaspheming against the Spirit and speaking against him are the exceptions. And it's not just a temporary problem. Look at this: "...either in this age or in the age to come." This is eternal. People who do this are condemned to eternal judgment. There is no hope for them.

What exactly happened?

So, what exactly did they do? Let's look at this in context. First, they're standing face-to-face with Jesus. They're watching him perform miracles - With their own eyes. They're listening to Jesus. They can evaluate whether Jesus is saying anything heretical (Which he is not doing).

Up to this point, Jesus is doing everything that the Messiah is supposed to do. The Pharisees are rejecting all of this, and they're doing so for selfish reasons.

Next, Jesus claims that his miracles are done through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees say it's the Devil. Many commentators believe that this "unpardonable sin" is a very rare thing. It can only happen if you're standing face-to-face with Jesus and accusing him of working for the Devil. So, it can't happen today.

A good example of this interpretation is the Apostle Paul. There's no evidence that he ever met Jesus while Jesus was walking as a human being on the earth. Paul was saved through an encounter with the risen Christ later. Here's how Paul described himself to his friend Timothy:

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. (I Timothy 1:12-14)

As we see here, Paul says he was a blasphemer. He says he persecuted the church. He was violent. Yet, God forgave him through Jesus Christ. Based on this, it looks like the unpardonable sin is something you can't commit today. That's a relief!

Applications of a proper understanding

Once you have a proper understanding of this, there are several important applications. Let's look at them.

Personal

Some people read this passage and wonder if they've committed this sin. Maybe one day they're a little depressed. And they think, "Oh no, God can't save me - Maybe I committed the unpardonable sin." That's nonsense. Today, God extends his grace to everyone - Just like he did with the Apostle Paul.

A response to false prophets

A second application comes when we encounter false prophets. We discussed them at some length during the Sermon on the Mount. False prophets do several things:

Con Artists

First, they're con artists - They use showman's tricks. Back when we discussed these people, I mentioned one of the classic examples: A man named W.V. Grant. He was a popular television evangelist in the 1980s. He would do things like this: He always travelled with a truckload of wheelchairs. If someone came with any kind of a problem, like a heart condition, he'd tell them to sit in one of the wheelchairs. Then, when they came on the stage, he'd tell them to get up out of their wheelchair. When they did everyone was impressed. Unfortunately, they didn't come in in a wheelchair! W.V. Grant made tons of money with tricks like this.

Sometimes, when con artists want to pull a fast one on Christians, they'll call up the unpardonable sin. If you doubt them, they'll say you're doubting the Holy Spirit. And so, maybe you can't be saved. Better send in money – maybe that will help. As you can see, this is very dangerous.

Sincere but misguided people

Some people are sincere, but misguided. We see a lot of this in what are called charismatic or Pentecostal churches. These churches claim that they participate in miraculous activities like speaking in tongues. We'll need to discuss these folks in more detail one day, but let's focus on one example. Sometimes, in these churches, people will walk to the front of the sanctuary during a worship service. The minister will touch them on the forehead, and they fall into a deep sleep. They literally fall – someone has to catch them. They call this, "being slain in the Spirit."

Now, there's no clear example of this in the Scripture. However, there is a clear example in the secular world. If you ever watch a presentation by a stage hypnotist, this happens all the time. After putting people into a hypnotic state, the hypnotist can merely say "fall asleep", and people do it right away.

So, there's an activity that happens in some churches that is explained by a well-known phenomenon. This is important, because one day, one of your friends may invite you to one of these churches. If you feel uncomfortable participating, they may threaten you with the

unpardonable sin. They believe this is happening through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, if you don't agree, they'll say you could be in big trouble. However, they're misguided. So, you don't need to participate.

The Final False Prophet

Finally, there will actually be a time when people perform miracles through the power of Satan. In the end times, the Scriptures predict a person called the Antichrist. One of his helpers will be a false prophet who performs miracles. The Scriptures say this will be through the power of the Devil.

What's different here? Here, it's important to understand a principle that goes all the way back to Moses:

1 If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, 2 and if the sign or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," 3 you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

So, there will be people who perform miracles through the power of Satan. However, (this is important) ***those people will tell you to follow Satan, as*** expressed through false gods. These false prophets are going to lead people astray.

This is what will happen in the end times. The Antichrist will encourage people to worship him as God. He will have the help of demonic forces to trick people into doing so.

So, we can see that it's vitally important to understand the nature of the unpardonable sin. It's not something people can do today, so don't let anyone pressure you with that threat.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, today we've seen the ultimate failure. The Pharisees were treated to sights that the rest of us can only envy. The Son of God visited the face of the earth and walked in front of them. He performed miracles that were perfectly in line with what the Messiah should do. He said things that were perfectly in line with what the Messiah should say. Tragically, he was also a threat to their power. So, they denied him. When there was no other way to explain his miraculous power, they said it was the power of the Devil.

For this, there was no forgiveness. From a spiritual perspective, you can fail in no greater way.

Does any of this apply to us today? Certainly. We are encouraged to listen thoughtfully when we hear evidence that the story of Jesus is real. We are called upon to believe.

Some say that there is only one unpardonable sin: That's to go to your grave refusing to follow Jesus. Once you die, there is no second chance. You have to make a choice. You're either with Jesus, or you're fighting against him. So, believe in Jesus today. Ask him to forgive your sins. Follow him. Let us tell you how. There is important information at the end of this article.

For those who have already followed Jesus, we are reminded of why we have to constantly listen to the whole body of Scripture. Why? We go about our daily lives unaware of the threats that may lie before us. We've just heard a good example: We may be confronted with con artists and misguided people who will try to tell us that we had better listen to them. If we don't, they'll threaten us with the possibility of having committed the unpardonable sin.

Now that you understand how that works, you don't need to be afraid. No one will be able to threaten you or intimidate you with that. Because of all this, we can rejoice that God has given us set of Scriptures that are sufficient for godliness.

If we learn the Scriptures well, they keep us safe. Here's what Paul says about people who know do this:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14)

Let's become followers of Jesus. Let's learn the Scriptures well. If we do so, we can avoid being the kind of failures that we've been reading about.

One day, our Lord will come back. On that day, people will see either the thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat. I hope you're on the right side when that happens.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church: TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site: PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site: PeaceWithGod.net
