



“The Unpardonable Sin”

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One of the most common questions that preachers are asked, I suppose, is the question *What is the sin that God will not forgive?* The Bible does speak about that. Can men commit that sin today? More personally, have I committed the unpardonable sin? Most students of the Bible have surely wondered about the words of our Lord that will serve as our text.

Matthew 12:31-32 “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

Serious words, indeed. Whatever this seemingly mysterious sin against the Holy Spirit is, we dare not be found guilty of it. We'll study this weighty passage of scripture today and learn about the unpardonable sin.

Any sin is serious in the sight of God. By definition, *sin* is *the transgression or breaking of God's law*.

I John 3:4 “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.”

ALL sin is devastating to our relationship with God, who is Holy and Just.

Ezekiel 18:20 “The soul that sinneth, it shall die...”

Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The Bible also tells us that God is rich in mercy and eager to forgive our sins when we approach Him through Christ in obedient faith. Any sin that a man can repent of CAN be forgiven. Any person who can believe and obey the conditions of the gospel can be saved. Jesus made that clear.

Matthew 11:28 “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

When the Lord commissioned His apostles to preach the gospel, He stressed that again.

Mark 16:15-16 “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

Just before the pen of revelation was laid down forevermore, as if to leave us with one last assurance of God’s grace and limitless mercy, John wrote this:

Revelation 22:17 “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”

Those who are Christians are told the following:

I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Yet, we have the text of our study today, where the scripture seems to strike a different tone as Jesus said that all manner of sin would be forgiven—even one who speaks against God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. But He said that one sin was beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness: that is, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. He said that no one who *blasphemes* or *speaks against* the Spirit of God would be forgiven then or in the world to come. Those words ring with cold and hopeless finality, don’t they? *No forgiveness, EVER.* Once you’ve committed that sin, according to Jesus, it’s over.

Another chilling passage is found in **Hebrews**.

Hebrews 6:6 “If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.”

These passages seem to suggest that some sins are of such a nature that they are beyond the reach of God’s mercy; for some reason and in some respect, those sins are considered unforgivable.

So, which is it? Can one be cleansed of ALL unrighteousness, as John says? Or are there sins that are beyond the pale and cannot be forgiven? Paul told Timothy that *all scripture is given by inspiration of God (II Timothy 3:16)* and God cannot lie. Therefore, scripture does not contradict scripture. The true interpretation of each passage will harmonize with the others, or else one or more of those interpretations is false. So, can I commit a sin that God will not forgive today? Is it possible that you or I are guilty of it?

First, let's consider the usual explanations that are given to explain our text passage. Some say that the sin consists of attributing Christ's power to perform miracles to Beelzebub. It is true that if you look at the surrounding context that what the Pharisees witnessed were the miracles of Jesus, and when they saw His miracles, they couldn't deny that they had seen a miracle; they would've been foolish to deny that a miracle had taken place. Miracles then were REAL miracles; not what men today claim are miracles. There was no disputing that Jesus had manifested miraculous power. But this was their dilemma: they either had to acknowledge that His power came from God, and thus acknowledge and confess Him as the Son of God OR they had to deny the miracle, which they could not do because it was obvious that the miracle took place. Because they refused to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, what they did was say that His power came from Beelzebub, an evil source. That certainly was a sin against the Holy Spirit. And it was certainly involved in what Jesus was referring to on this occasion. But this sin against the Holy Spirit has a much wider application.

Then there are those who say the unpardonable sin could only be committed while Jesus was on earth performing miracles, and since the miraculous age has passed, it therefore has no relevance to modern people. Since the Holy Spirit is no longer empowering men to perform miracles, it is impossible to sin against Him, as Jesus speaks of it. Well, that can't be true because neither God nor Christ are empowering men to perform miracles today, and that reasoning would lead us to conclude that one cannot sin against God or Christ today either. That can't be correct.

Some warn us that refusing to accept the modern and speculative theories that people advance about the Holy Spirit and His supposed manner of working in the world today might just be the sin to which Jesus was referring. That's not the case either. For one thing, rejecting the false doctrines of men about the Holy Spirit isn't speaking against Him; it's defending the truth of the Holy Spirit. It's not speaking against the Spirit Himself, but speaking against the false doctrines that these men come up with and spread about the Holy Spirit. Things that the Bible does not teach.

Others are under the impression that the sin against the Holy Spirit is decreed unpardonable because of the nature of the Holy Spirit and His work. In other words, Christ was really exalting the third person of the Godhead as being so holy and special, in effect, that it is beyond the pale and unforgiveable to speak a word against Him. That has nothing to do with it, per se. Yes, the Holy Spirit is divine. He is the third person of the Godhead. He is certainly holy and to be revered. But no more than Christ or God the Father.

John 16:14 "He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you."

The Spirit's purpose was to bring glory to Jesus—not the other way around. To listen to some preachers today, you would think Jesus was sent to be the forerunner of the Holy Spirit, but that's not the way it was. The Holy Spirit came after Jesus in order to point back to Jesus and shed light upon Him and lift Him up and glorify Him by the revelation of the gospel plan of salvation in Christ.

Still others have concluded that the unpardonable sin might be the act of suicide, since one who commits it has no opportunity to repent and seek forgiveness. But as terrible and heartbreaking of a circumstance that it is for all involved, suicide is not a sin against the Holy Spirit in the context in which Jesus is speaking of here. Nowhere is such an idea or action under consideration in this particular passage.

Finally, some believe that it is the sin that John speaks of in his epistle.

I John 5:16 “If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.”

Let’s think about this for a moment. John says that there IS sin NOT unto death. That doesn’t mean that any sin is not serious or worthy of death. That’s not what he is saying. He is saying there is not a sin that brings irrevocable judgment, for which there is no repentance and forgiveness. Rather, there is sin not unto death and when a brother commits such a sin, we may pray to God on his behalf and the Lord will hear and answer. But on the other hand, there IS a sin that IS unto death. This is a sense of finality. When a brother is guilty of it, he says it does no good to pray for him because God will not forgive it. That sounds frightening. What is this *sin unto death* that John is warning of? The answer is actually back in the first chapter of this epistle.

I John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

This passage says that the Lord will forgive ALL sins that a brother confesses. If he says ALL sins can be forgiven, then there’s no exception to that. The Lord will forgive ALL sins that a brother confesses. But in chapter 5, he said there is a sin that the Lord WON’T forgive. So, what we can conclude from both passages is that the sin the Lord WON’T forgive is the sin that a brother refuses to confess and acknowledge. That is, if a man will not acknowledge his sin before God, thus repenting of it and turning away from it, it does no good to pray to God for his forgiveness. He has to acknowledge and repent of his sin, humbling himself before God or else there is no forgiveness for it.

Not only that: the sin under consideration in our text (**Matthew 12:31**) was a sin committed by an *unbeliever* who rejected the deity of Jesus. Whereas the sin of **I John 5:16** is a sin committed by a *brother* in the Lord, who has at one time accepted the truth about Jesus. So, they are not talking about the same thing. John is talking about a sin that a Christian refuses to acknowledge and turn from, so it does no good to pray for such an one’s forgiveness. (Consequently, that passage refutes the Calvinistic doctrine of *once saved, always saved* as John is writing a letter to saints—*Christians*—and he warns them about a brother committing a sin unto death. How can a man be saved if he is guilty of a sin that God will not forgive, you see?)

Back to our text now. Since we’ve seen what Jesus is NOT talking about, let’s see what He IS talking about. Let’s read the passage again.

Matthew 12:31-32 “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

Notice carefully: a person may sin against God and be forgiven. He may sin against Christ and be forgiven. But if he sins against the Holy Spirit, he cannot be forgiven. Then Jesus adds, *neither in this world, nor in the world to come*. The translation *world* there is perhaps a little misleading to some. He’s NOT saying “not in this life nor in the life beyond.” That can’t be the case because NO sin will be forgiven

in the life that is to come. *Now is the time of salvation...*the Bible is abundantly clear about that. There will be no forgiveness extended after the probation period of this earthly life is over. Right now, God's mercy is being shown to mankind in offering him the gospel plan of salvation. The judgement bar is not going to be where God's mercy is shown. God's mercy is shown NOW and you and I best avail ourselves of it while we yet have the breath of life and the power to choose it. If you refuse God's mercy now, only judgment awaits in the life to come.

The word translated *world* in this passage is often used in the Bible for *age or dispensation*. Meaning, those who committed this sin against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven in the age in which Jesus spoke this (which was, consequently, the Mosaic age, living yet under the law), neither would it be forgiven in the age or dispensation to come (which is the present age or Christian dispensation, when the gospel would be fully preached and offered to all mankind).

So, what is the sin? Why is it so serious to sin against the Holy Spirit? Guy N. Woods used to illustrate it this way, and I think it's an excellent, fitting, and logical explanation of the words of Christ. Mr. Woods' illustration went like this: Imagine a man is in a boat floating down the river and below him are some dangerous rapids, over which if he passes, he goes to his death. Let's say a little way down the river, a man stands on the bank and shouts a warning to him. The man in the boat ignores it and floats on. A little further down, a second man shouts a second warning and offers to pull the man out of the water. But he refuses that man, too, floating on. Just before he reaches the brink, a third man shouts a final, emphatic, plain warning to him, making a last offer to save the man, but that, too, is refused. So, the man is swept over the rushing falls to his doom.

Let's consider the illustration. The man in the boat might've accepted the first man's offer and been saved. Perhaps he waits, and accepts the second man's offer; he could still be saved. In fact, he could've even rejected both the first AND the second man's offers and still accepted offer number three; he still would've been saved. But when he passed up the third offer, he passed on his last chance at salvation. You know, that's what many have done. When man sinned in the garden of Eden, God's justice would've allowed the annihilation of the human race. But thank God, mercy stepped in and stayed the judgment of God. For at least 4,000 years, through the tearful pleadings of the Old Testament prophets, God sought to turn wayward man from his sinful course, but with little success. The prophet Isaiah represents himself in this way, according to the apostle Paul:

Romans 10:21 "But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people."

So, through the prophets, God extended the first offer, which was largely refused. Then in the fullness of time, He sent His Son to the lost world. That was offer number two, and that, too, was rejected.

John 1:11 "He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

Not only did the masses reject Him as the Son of God; they crucified Him. Still, amazingly, the mercy of God had not run out. Just 50 days after the resurrection, at Pentecost, offer number three was extended—to them, to you and to me. It was extended through the work and the influence of the Holy Spirit that was poured out upon the apostles. He worked through them in their revealing of the gospel to the world. But, my friend, listen carefully: that's it. That's offer number three and that is the last. There will never be another plan offered to the world. The gospel which the Holy Spirit brought to earth

through the apostles and confirmed in them by the miracles they performed is the final offer of mercy to mankind. If you reject the gospel plan of salvation, doom awaits. No if, and, or but about it.

II Thessalonians 1:7-9 “And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;”

You remember how the Hebrew writer warned those Christians who would leave Christ and return to the sacrifices of the Jewish temple:

Hebrews 10:27-29 “But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?”

Don't think that this sin is committed in a single act of disbelief; it's a gradual sin. It begins when one grieves the Spirit, like a disobedient child grieves a parent. It leads to one resisting the teaching of the Spirit, as the Jews did; they resisted the prophets. And, finally, quenching the Spirit; that is, destroying the influence of the Spirit in one's life by totally, finally repudiating and shutting the door of one's heart to the gospel. In so doing, the sinner becomes numb to the appeal of the gospel and he becomes so hard of heart that the gospel cannot reach him.

You see, the unforgiveable sin is not a sin that God cannot forgive as much as it is a sin that man cannot repent of because he destroyed his heart through his rejection, and he passed up the last and final and proven appeal of salvation in Jesus Christ revealed by the Spirit. Friend, that is very serious. If you have not obeyed the gospel, why don't you open the door of your heart to Christ today by obeying Him in baptism?

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