

Text: Matthew 12:22-32

Title: The Unpardonable Sin

Truth: Blaspheming the Spirit of God is unpardonable.

Date/Location: Sunday November 21, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

Matthew 12:31-32 “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy *against* the Spirit will not be forgiven men.³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come.”

Over the years, I have received many questions about the unpardonable sin—perhaps more than any other topic. It can be very troubling to a believer who thinks he may have committed this sin and therefore be lost forever. But as we will see, this fear is based on an uninformed view of the passage. By digging a bit deeper, we can understand truly what the sin is and know better who could be guilty of it. It is interesting—but completely understandable from a theological perspective—that almost never are non-Christians concerned about this question.

One of the complications to understanding the unpardonable sin is that there are passages in Scripture which talk about sins that are similar, but not the same. We will look at a couple of these first, and then carefully study the Matthew 12 passage.

I. Similar Sins in the Bible

Hebrews 6:4-6 For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put *Him* to an open shame.

- A. Hebrews 6:4-6—This section has to do with apostasy. There are several ways people have understood this passage, but I take the view that it describes a false believer who commits apostasy (stands away from the faith) and the result is eternal condemnation.
1. By using the generic third person instead of the first person “we” of verse 3, the author seems to distance the readers from the warning. He is not directly accusing them of falling away.
 2. The people described have what *seems* to be a genuine experience of salvation. The light bulb went on in some sense, they learned about salvation in some sense, they observed the work of the Spirit, they experienced God’s good Word and even saw some of the miraculous signs of the coming kingdom age.
 - i. These could be taken to refer to true salvation, but the rest of the text weighs against it.
 - ii. There are others mentioned in the Bible who have some outward expression but not the inward reality of salvation. Consider those false teachers in Matthew 7:21-22 (context 7:13-23). They had some outward appearance of miraculous works (gifts of the Spirit?) but Christ did not know them as His own.
 3. But they also have fallen away. In the context of Hebrews, this is parallel to those who neglect salvation (2:3) or have an evil heart of unbelief that departs from the living God (3:12) or who miss the rest of God because of unbelief (4:1) or who fall according to the same example of disobedience (4:11).
 4. What and why is this impossible thing?

Impossible is used in three other places in Hebrews, all referring to something that cannot possibly happen (6:18, 10:4, 11:6). The impossibility has to do with God being unable to extend any offer of forgiveness, repentance, salvation, or eternal life once Christ has been rejected.

To be saved after rejecting the only way of salvation is impossible because it would require re-crucifying Christ and

re-humiliating Him. He has done that once, with no repeat possible. There is no way outside of Jesus Christ to get saved.

5. The warning here is intended to prevent the fatal result that is mentioned. In other words, the warning has a salutary purpose.
6. There are two similarities between Hebrews 6 and the unpardonable sin. The outcome of condemnation is the same as with the unpardonable sin: no forgiveness and no eternal life. Secondly, miracles are an issue in the unpardonable sin, just like “tasting the powers of the age to come” probably refers to miracles in Hebrews 6.

But the other circumstances surrounding the two types of sin are entirely different. There is no idea in Hebrews 6 of speaking a word against the Spirit of God. Attributing the works of Christ to the Devil is not found in Hebrews. In Matthew and the other gospel accounts of the unpardonable sin, there is no mention of people who seemed to be believers but fall away. To the contrary, the Pharisees seem as far as possible from the things of God. I conclude that the two sins are not the same.

- B. 1 John 5:16—This verse deals with various sins that either result in physical death or do not (immediately) have such an outcome.

1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin *which does not lead* to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is sin *leading* to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

1. God invites the Christian to pray for a brother who is sinning, and the believer can pray with confidence that he will be heard by God and that God will deliver that brother from his sin. Many sins are not lethal (at least immediately so), yet they are of serious concern nonetheless. Christians need to pray for other believers.
2. It is important for you to pray for your brothers to overcome sin. Remember your fellow Christians in this way. They need God’s help, which can be procured through *your* help.

3. Yet there also exist sins that *do* lead to death. The apostle John is not saying that the observing Christian should pray about that. If a sin has been committed that results in the person's death, there is no use in praying for the person to get out of it, because they will not. I have envisioned an example of a person who commits murder and is subject to the death penalty. They deserve that penalty and there is no getting out of it—thus no need to desperately pray for deliverance because God will not do so. Of course, that assumes your estimation is correct about what sins result in physical death.
4. Also, John does not specify who does such sins (believer or unbeliever). Therefore, this provides us with no information that could be useful in identifying exactly what the unpardonable sin of Matthew 12 is. Simply put, no information is given here that can help in that identification.
5. Finally, I have understood that the kind of death here has to be *physical* death. We know that all sin leads to spiritual death—separation from God—so if some sin does *not* lead to “death,” the type of death John is talking about must be physical death. If the person is a brother, they cannot commit a sin that leads to spiritual death, because salvation is eternally secure. If a brother commits a sin, there is no question that such a sin cannot result in spiritual death, but there may be a question about whether physical death could be a result. So it must be that the brother commits a sin where that sin leads to physical death.
6. On the other hand, the unpardonable sin obviously leads to *spiritual* death—because it is a sin that is not forgiven forever. This means eternal punishment in the lake of fire. It must therefore be the case that the two kinds of sin are somehow different—the 1 John 5:16 kind and the unpardonable sin kind. The unpardonable sin leads to spiritual death; John is speaking of a different sort of thing that may or may not lead to physical death. I conclude that 1 John 5:16 does not give us any helpful information to understand the unpardonable sin.

C. The Presumptuous or High-Handed Sin of the Old Testament

1. Examples: Numbers 15:30-31, Exodus 21:14, Deut. 17:12-13, 18:20-22. In these contexts, the sinner takes to himself some prerogative that does not belong to him, whether it be to consciously violate Sabbath, prophesy falsely in God's name, or not obey the priest, or murder "with guile," that is, with premeditation.
2. These are all capital offenses and there is a question about whether any of them are forgiven by God. The reality is that people who commit such sin are not seeking God's forgiveness, and God does not extend forgiveness to the person who refuses to seek it.
3. They lack some of the particulars of the unpardonable sin in the gospels: Jesus is not present, there is not a word spoke against the Holy Spirit, miracles are not part of the equation. I take it that this sub-category of sin is not the same as the unpardonable sin, even though the eternal consequences are the same.

II. The Context: Another Miracle Healing, Matthew 12:22

- A. The man was in a sad state: he was possessed by a demon, unable to see, and unable to speak. How Matthew knew there was a demon involved is not explained, but we take His eyewitness testimony as the truth.
- B. In a very simple narrative, the Bible records that Jesus healed him, so that he could immediately speak and see. The demon was gone.

III. Right and Wrong Attribution, 12:23-24

- A. The crowd of onlookers was amazed about this. They saw that the miracle was inexplicable apart from the power of God. It was obvious because a demon had been cast out, and impossibly hard things were done to heal a man who could not see or speak. Although Jesus had gone around doing good, perhaps this particular crowd had not seen all of His miracles; it had not yet become "run of the mill" to them.

They were inclined to think that Jesus was the “Son of David.” What that means is that they thought Jesus might be the Messiah, because they expected the Messiah to be a Son of David. Matthew 1:1 introduces Jesus as the Son of David. Two blind men recognized the same (Matt. 9:27). The promise of 2 Samuel 7:12-16 indicates that this ultimate promised Son would reign on David’s throne forever. They remember reading about the healing of blind people in Isaiah (35:5, of the future glorious Kingdom¹).

They were not “there” yet with a full acknowledgement of the Messiah who was living in their midst, but they were on the right track.

- B. The Pharisees took a different direction and were on the entirely wrong track. They said that Jesus was casting out demons because He was closely associated with (or possessed by?) the Devil. He could order demons to leave a person because He was in effect the boss of demons. They conveniently left out the healing of blindness and muteness because it was not as easy to handle in a simplistic way. It seems a stretch to suggest that the Devil would like to heal a blind and mute man.

The Pharisees had done this before—see Matthew 9:34. Jesus mentions it like it is a standard objection to his ministry (Matthew 10:25). In Mark 3:22, notice that they “were saying.” This is in the imperfect tense, indicating that they said it over and over. Hang on to that thought! Saying this kind of thing was their regular practice. This was no slip of the tongue or casual comment. It was done repeatedly, purposefully, and hatefully, indicating a hardness of heart in the face of clear evidence that something divine was going on before their eyes.

They could not bear to admit the possibility that this Man came from God, or they would upend their entire system. So they promulgated a piece of propaganda that said that Jesus is one with the Devil.

¹ Isaiah 29:18 mentions blindness, but it concerns spiritual blindness, not physical.

IV. The Folly of Ascribing Jesus's Power to the Devil, 12:25-30

- A. The basic idea of this section is that it is not only wrong to say that Jesus is empowered by Satan, but it is nonsensical. The “logic” of the unbeliever is not logic at all because it is out of step with the truth.
- B. Divided kingdoms fall, 12:225-26. The Lord makes the obvious observation that if Satan is against his own underling demons, then his dominion will fall apart. But that is clearly not happening, and it is preposterous to think that one of the most powerful angels—Lucifer—who fell, would lose control of his kingdom.

The principle of divided kingdoms, divided cities, and divided houses is true in general. If our nation, state, city, or household is divided against itself, it will break up. Married people need to see themselves as members of the same team, not against each other. There must be a common thread that holds a country together or else it will be unable to sustain itself.

- C. The Lord also undercuts the Pharisees' idea of his source of power by supposing that they are correct for the sake of argument. Therefore, how to Jewish exorcists supposedly cast out demons? They must also do so by the power of the Devil. No effective argument can be raised against that supposition. Left unstated is the obvious—if they are truly casting out demons, then they are on God's side, and they will judge the Jewish leaders who are definitely not on God's side.
- D. On the other hand, if the Lord does indeed cast out demons like those Jewish exorcists do—by the Spirit of the true God—then it must be that the kingdom of God is dawning. Jesus was a remarkable messenger of the kingdom. John before Him had told the people that He was the one to come. He proved it by huge numbers of miracles. His teaching was like no one before Him.
- E. Illustration of the strong man. The strong man represents Satan. Only if someone is stronger than the “strong man” will he be able to tie up the strong man and plunder the house (kingdom). Jesus is the stronger one. He has authority over Satan and that is why he can command the demons to leave people alone. This completes

the argument that the Lord could not be casting out demons by the power of Satan. It is nonsense to think that.

- F. In 12:30, the Lord basically says that if you are not with Me, then you are against Me. He gives the same idea a second time: if you are not gathering with Him, then you are scattering. The Pharisees were against the Lord and were trying to scatter His sheep. True disciples gather in the sheep and are on the Lord's side.

V. The Unpardonable Sin

- A. Finally, now that the context of the miracle is explained out and sides have been taken, Jesus makes a conclusion: "Therefore..."
- B. The focus of the unpardonable sin question always is on the one sin that is *not* forgiven. But do you notice that it is the exception to the general rule? Notice what the text says: "every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men." Let that sink in, brothers and sisters. EVERY SIN WILL BE FORGIVEN with the exception of one particular type of sin. That is a description of the tremendous grace of God. You have sinned...but God is willing and able to forgive. Are you willing to come to Him for that forgiveness by trusting in Christ?
- C. Whatever the blasphemy against the Spirit is will not be forgiven. It must be a very serious thing. But what is it? Jesus explains in verse 32: "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or the age to come." That means *never*. So the blasphemy against the Spirit, and thus the unpardonable sin, is defined as speaking against the Spirit of God.
- Many a person has spoken against Christ. Even the apostle Paul did so. Many have taken the name of Jesus Christ and used it as a swear word or in some other empty way. But all that can be forgiven, for which we thank the Lord.

However, if someone speaks against the Spirit of God, no forgiveness. It seems that the Lord Jesus is very protective of the Spirit, and well He is.

- D. And what is this "speaking against the Spirit of God?" We go back to the context in which the Pharisees do that very thing: they

attribute the works of Jesus to the Devil, instead of where the real attribution belongs—to the Holy Spirit of God. It is the Spirit who was enabling the man Jesus to do these wonderful works, but they were rejecting the Spirit's work in Jesus. They were in effect speaking against the Spirit by calling the Spirit demonic. And here is the thing: they were doing so in a context where it was *crystal clear* that what was happening was an act of God. There was no excuse for them. They had the Scriptures, they had the testimony of John the Baptist; they had works of Christ; they knew what was going on, and they rejected it anyway. Besides, to them much was given, so much was required (Luke 12:48).

Conclusion

So, can you commit the unpardonable sin? If you are a believer in Christ, it is impossible to do so because you are already pardoned! What about if you are an unbeliever? It *was* possible back when Jesus was on earth, but today the work of the Spirit is not operational in the same way it was then, because Christ is not here doing the miracles He did at that time. The unpardonable sin was set in a specific context which is not reproducible today. Hence, no one can commit it today.

That is not to say that people cannot sin grievously, for they do. And it is also not to say that there is no way to set yourself against Christ and go down the path of unbelief. Some are far down that path, having committed apostasy, from which there is no return. Others are far down that path but can be recovered if they repent of their sins and believe in Christ.

Dr. William Combs wrote the conclusion of his paper this way:

“What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? It is the sin of blaspheming the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit. It was committed by the Pharisees who were saying that the miracles of Jesus were being accomplished by Satan's power. It is not a flippant act or slip of the tongue, but one that can be characterized as a positive speaking of the heart. Also, it is not a sin of ignorance but is done in full knowledge of the truth. It is an attempt to deny the undeniable. This sin is unpardonable because the person who

commits it never seeks forgiveness. Instead, God permits such a person to remain in his own depravity. Obviously, such a sin could only be committed by an unbeliever, but since the Holy Spirit is not producing sign-miracles in this age, the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be committed by anyone today.”

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