

## **The Unpardonable Sin**

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In the Bible Jesus warns of a sin God will never forgive, an eternal sin. God's mercy is enormous, his love is vast beyond all imagining, his grace pardons many things we might fear are unforgivable, but according to Jesus, one sin really is unforgivable. In Mark 3:28-29 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

Before we try to figure out what Jesus means here, the very fact that Jesus speaks such a solemn warning should shake us and wake us. Many people, even church people, are so eager to be positive and upbeat that the word *sin* has almost disappeared from our vocabulary. We're so sure of our goodness that we don't worry about offending God. We're so sure God accepts everybody as they are, so sure God owes us a pleasant life and a happy eternity, that we can hardly imagine Jesus speaking of an eternal sin, a sin which could place us beyond all possibility of forgiveness. But Jesus' plain warning—a warning addressed to respected religious leaders, by the way—should shock us and show us that God may not be as sweet and harmless as we thought and that sin may be more deadly than we thought.

There is a sin which brings the worst wickedness of hell into a human heart, a sin which can make a human as unforgivable as Satan himself, a sin which puts a person on a one-way road with no exits, a road that leads to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus warns us against making Satan's attitude our own and making hellfire the only possibility in our future.

### **Blaspheming the Holy Spirit**

What is the unpardonable sin? What does Jesus mean when he speaks of blaspheming the Holy Spirit?

To understand this, we need to know the setting for Jesus' words. During Jesus' time on earth, he healed people and drove demons out of many. He saved miserable people from evil spirits that had been controlling and tormenting them. How could Jesus make demons depart? By the divine power of God's Holy Spirit. When Jesus was starting his public ministry, John the Baptist said of Jesus, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him" (John 1:32). Jesus himself declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" (John 4:18). In word and deed Jesus made it clear that the Holy Spirit was at work.

But some religious leaders were determined not to believe in Jesus. They rejected his words and refused to honor the obvious good he was doing. They couldn't deny his power over demons, but instead of praising the power of God's Holy Spirit, they cooked up another explanation. They said that the only reason demons left when Jesus ordered them out was that Jesus himself was possessed by the chief demon of them all.

But did that make any sense? Were the religious leaders making an honest mistake in saying Jesus' power over demons came from Satan? No, it's obvious that Satan isn't stupid enough to fight against himself. "How can Satan drive out Satan?" asked Jesus. "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a

house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come” (Mark 3:23-26).

Jesus’ actions were so amazing, so liberating, so life-giving, so damaging to Satan and his demons, that it was obvious that no demonic spirit would empower such actions; only the divine Spirit would do so. If Satan’s forces were being driven back, it meant that someone even stronger than Satan had bound Satan and was taking Satan’s property away from him. “If I drive out demons *by the Spirit of God*,” said Jesus, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 12:28).

Jesus went on to say that just about any sin could be forgiven, even blasphemy against Jesus in his human nature. But if someone directly encountered the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus and said it was Satan’s work, they had committed the unpardonable sin or were at least on the edge of doing so. They were at best on the edge of a cliff and at worst already plunging toward hell with no possibility of rescue.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is deliberate, defiant rejection of the Spirit’s work. It is consciously choosing to call good evil, speaking of God’s kingdom as an enemy power. It’s not a slip of the tongue or a string of curses uttered in a fit of anger. It’s not something that can be done by uninformed people with no definite exposure to Christ and the Holy Spirit. This sin can be committed only by people who have a clear and powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit’s action and who choose to speak against the Spirit in a horrible way.

What happens when someone commits this sin? Do they feel horrible regret and beg to be forgiven, only to have God reject their prayer? No, those who commit the unpardonable sin don’t seek forgiveness at all. Indeed, that’s what makes the sin beyond forgiveness: it removes the possibility of repentance. God will pardon any sin that a person repents of, but anyone who commits this sin will never repent because repentance is impossible without the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can make a person aware of sin and long for a new heart. Only the Holy Spirit can move someone to seek forgiveness in Christ and eternal life. You can’t be forgiven of sin if you can’t repent of it, and you can’t repent of it if you’ve defied the Holy Spirit and called him the opposite of what he is. If you reject the Holy Spirit’s obvious action and speak evil of the Spirit’s work, you drive away the very Holy Spirit who alone can ever produce repentance in a human heart. God forgives anyone who repents of a sin and asks forgiveness for Jesus’ sake, but if you blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, you will never repent or ask forgiveness, and you will never get it.

Jesus’ warning about the unpardonable sin should sober us and warn us not to stand against the Holy Spirit and not to take God’s judgment lightly. But as Jesus disturbs the comfortable, he also comforts the disturbed.

### **Magnitude of Mercy**

Do you fear you’ve done something unforgivable? You would have no such fear if you were beyond forgiveness. Those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit do not feel regret or fear. Fear of the Lord is a sign that God has not cast you away completely.

When Jesus warns of the unpardonable sin, he first says, “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.” It’s frightening that one type of sin will never be forgiven, but it’s encouraging that every other kind of sin imaginable can be forgiven.

If you think you've done something so bad that God can't possibly forgive it, think again. Is your sin bigger than God's mercy? Does your evil surpass the value of Jesus' blood? No, any sin for which you ask forgiveness will be forgiven, no matter what that sin might be. If you fear you've done something unforgivable, search the Scriptures, and you'll see someone who did that very thing and was forgiven by God.

If your sin is drunkenness, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Noah got drunk (Genesis 9:21), and God forgave him.

If your sin is lying, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Abraham lied (Genesis 20:2), and God forgave him.

If your sin is prostitution, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 6:25), and God forgave her.

If your sin is adultery, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. King David committed adultery, and God forgave him (2 Samuel 12:13).

If you're a parent who killed your own child by abortion, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Even if you're a mass murderer, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. King Manasseh of Judah sacrificed his own son and spilled enough innocent blood to flood Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:16), and God forgave him (2 Chronicles 33:13).

If your sin is refusing to go on a mission God has plainly called you to do, you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Jonah went the opposite way when God told him to preach to Nineveh (Jonah 1:3), but God forgave him.

If your sin is divorce, even being divorced several times, you have not committed the unpardonable sin. A Samaritan woman had five husbands plus a live-in lover by the time she met Jesus (John 4:18), but God forgave her.

If your sin is cheating and stealing and misusing government power, you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Zacchaeus used his government position as tax collector to rip off many people (Luke 19:1-10), but God forgave him.

If your sin is being so messed up that demons from hell are literally at home in you and running your life, you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Mary Magdalene had seven demons (Luke 8:2), and God forgave her.

If your sin is chickening out under pressure and refusing to identify with Jesus and even cursing to prove it, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Peter denied Christ with curses (Mark 14:70), and God forgave him.

If your sin is doubt and disbelief, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection and wouldn't believe those who saw Christ alive (John 20:25), and God forgave him.

If your sin is blasphemy against Jesus and cruelty to Christians, you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. The apostle Paul was formerly "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, (1 Timothy 1:13), and God forgave him.

If your sin is involvement in voodoo or making deals with evil spirits or worshipping false gods who are really demons, you have not committed the unpardonable sin. Many in Corinth had done such things, but God forgave them.

If your sin is pornography or homosexuality or stealing or cheating (1 Corinthians 6:9-11), you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. If your sin is doing something wrong over and over, even though you know it's wrong and wish you could stop

(Romans 7:19), you haven't committed the unpardonable sin. People in the Bible did all these things and worse, but they were made right with God and made clean.

Does this mean that such sins are just a minor matter? Of course not. All sin offends God and deserves hell. And that's exactly where each of these sins will bring you apart from repentance and forgiveness. You can't enter God's kingdom if you won't repent and reject your sin. Forgiveness is not automatic. If you won't admit that you're wrong, if you don't want to change, if you reject Jesus' death as the payment for your sin, you will remain unforgiven, and you will suffer God's punishment forever in the fires of hell.

But if you do turn to God, if you are sorry for your sin and confess how wrong it is, if you want to escape it and ask pardon for the sake of Jesus' blood, then God will surely forgive you. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He will forgive and purify us not just from a few minor mistakes but from *all unrighteousness*. All! Whatever you've done, his blood can wash it away. His grace can forgive it. So don't let fears or feelings of guilt hold you back. "I tell you the truth," declares Jesus, "*all* the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them." What a comfort!

If you fear that you've committed the unpardonable sin, you haven't. If you hate your sin and agree with God that it was wrong, if you long to be forgiven and free, then you may be sure that you have not committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit. The very fact that you hate the sin and want to be accepted by God means that the Holy Spirit's hand is on you, moving you to detest sin and desire God.

### **Depression Is Not Damnation**

Some of the people mostly like to fear they've committed the unpardonable sin are those who suffer from depression. Depression is a terrible illness. Some depressed people have been deeply wounded in body and spirit by sexual abuse or terrible beatings when they were children. A relative or someone close to them violated them and treated them like garbage and told them it was all their fault. Deep down they feel that God despises them in the same way their abuser despised them. They feel dirty and think that nobody who knows their terrible secret could possibly accept them. God knows every secret, so he'll never accept them—at least that's what they think.

Others have not suffered such abuse but still struggle with depression for another reason, whether because of a chemical imbalance in their body, a genetic weakness, too much stress and too little rest, or some other cause. Whatever causes the depression, one effect is that you look at everything through dark glasses. Bright, happy things look gloomy through the dark glasses of depression, and bad things look downright hopeless.

When you're depressed, you're quick to ignore the best and believe the worst about your future. When you read promises of forgiveness and salvation in the Bible, you hardly notice the good news, or you think the promises must be meant for someone else. But when you hear biblical threats of judgment and punishment, you take the bad news personally. When you hear Jesus talk about the unpardonable sin, you remember something bad you did, and you jump to the conclusion that Jesus meant you when he spoke of an eternal sin. You might hear the list of sins which Bible characters committed and which God forgave, but you might still think you're beyond forgiveness. You might

think that the God who forgave liars, drunkards, adulterers, and mass murderers can't find it in his heart to forgive you.

Your grim, gloomy feelings might make you think that God doesn't love you, that he wants you to be miserable forever. But don't trust your fragile feelings; trust God's truth in the Bible. The Bible says that God is love and sent Jesus to bring salvation. Depression is a terrible burden to bear, but your dreadful feeling does not reveal God's attitude toward you, and it does not reveal your eternal destiny. God has as much love and mercy for emotionally wounded or mentally ill people as he has for anyone.

Some of the people dearest to God's heart have suffered from depression. At times John Bunyan struggled with depression and feared he had committed the unpardonable sin. But God loved him and empowered him to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the best-selling book in the English-speaking world besides the Bible. Bunyan's earlier struggles with feeling hopeless made him all the more effective when he wrote about the cruel giant Despair and about escaping from Despair's dungeon.

Charles Spurgeon, nicknamed "the prince of preachers," went through many times of depression and misery, but that did not mean his faith was phony or that God rejected him. Spurgeon's personal struggles with depression made him all the better at understanding and helping other depressed people. I could add many more examples of people who sometimes felt forsaken but were actually among God's dearest friends.

Some depressed people have spoken awful words against God in a fit of despair, but even then they have not committed the unpardonable sin. It takes a certain kind of person to commit unforgivable blasphemy against the Spirit. The Spirit-rejecting scribes Jesus addressed were not emotionally crushed or mentally ill or desperately upset. They were calm, cool, intellectual leaders who clearly saw the Spirit's power working through Jesus and deliberately chose a set pattern of wickedly calling good evil, declaring Jesus to be empowered by Satan and not by the Spirit. This is a far cry from wretched, emotionally disturbed people bursting out with words they don't really mean.

A troubled mind is not able to commit the unpardonable sin—and any sin that troubles the mind later is not the unpardonable sin. We know this because if someone really did cross the point of no return and commit the unpardonable sin, their conscience would be so hard, so unfeeling, so far from the Spirit's convicting influence, that their sin would not bother them.

Let me say as clearly as I can: Depression is not the unpardonable sin. In many cases depression is not a sin at all; it is a sickness. Depression is a terrible illness that God will heal in heaven, not a crime that he will punish in hell. If you suffer from depression, put your crushed spirit in the loving hands of Jesus. Don't let Satan use your sickness against you. The illness is painful enough without letting Satan torment you with the lie that you've committed the unpardonable sin. God has compassion for wounded hearts. Scripture says of Jesus, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Matthew 12:20).

### **Dangerous Games**

The Lord offers loving assurance to the fearful, but let's not forget his warning to the rebellious and the careless. There is such a thing as the unpardonable sin, and what's more, every sin will go unpardoned apart from faith in Jesus' blood and commitment to him. Even if a sin is forgivable, it will not be forgiven apart from

repentance and faith in Christ. If you die in your sins, you will perish forever, because death takes you beyond the point where repentance and forgiveness are possible.

Just before Jesus warned about the unpardonable sin, he warned, “He who is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). Don’t think that as long as you haven’t committed the unpardonable sin, you’re safe. You’re not safe at all if you’re not connected with Christ. If you’re not with Jesus, you’re against him, and you are on the road to hell. You’re not there yet, and you can still be forgiven and saved, but that is where you’re headed apart from Christ.

Only willful blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can move you beyond the possibility of forgiveness in this life, and that particular sin is very rare. But this doesn’t make sin any less deadly, or unbelief any less serious. If you go on in sin and unbelief, you are playing a dangerous game. If you do not live by faith in Jesus Christ and you die without him, you will end up in hell just like those who have committed the unpardonable sin. God’s mercy in Jesus is great, but that makes his wrath all the greater if we refuse the gift of God’s own Son. Hebrews 2:3 asks, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?”

An especially deadly sin, closely related to the unpardonable sin, is the sin of apostasy. Apostasy is turning away from Christ after you’ve been taught his truth, tasted blessings from his Spirit, and been part of his church. You decide to leave it all behind and look for fulfillment apart from Christ. Hebrews 6:4-6 warns,

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Hebrews 10:26-27 issues a similar warning:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

The Lord warns again and again not to harden our hearts against him (Hebrews 4:7), and he warns that if we do, the hardness may become permanent. In Psalm 81:12 God says, “I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.”

Beware of rejecting God and going on in sin, thinking that you can always repent later on if you want. Pastor John Piper says that this is “like the buzzard who spots a carcass on a piece of ice floating in the river. He lands and begins to eat. He knows it is dangerous because the falls are just ahead. But he looks at his wings and says to himself, ‘I can fly to safety in an instant.’ And he goes on eating. Just before the ice goes over the falls he spreads his wings to fly but his claws are frozen in the ice and there is no escape—neither in this age nor the age to come.”

The longer you float along in sin, the more you become attached to it until you cannot let go. So if you are able to repent and plead for God’s mercy right now, then do so. Don’t wait. Later may be too late. Let go of your sin and fly to safety in Christ while you still have the opportunity. God is calling you right now. If this message is tugging at your heart, you haven’t committed the unpardonable sin, and you’re not beyond repentance. God’s arms of mercy are wide open to receive you. Go to Jesus, and receive his forgiveness, full and free.