

Portraits of Jesus

The One Unforgivable Sin

Matthew 12:22-32

Mark Vroegop

22 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. 23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." 25 Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. 26 And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? 27 And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house. 30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 31 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matt 12:22-32).

We live in a day and age of "do-overs" and "come-backs." It seems as though anyone can do just about anything and reasonably expect that the consequences will not be permanent. Our post-modern culture barely has categories and even less tolerance for irrevocable penalties. In sports, politics, marriage, education, and even religion we'd rather not think or talk about consequences that cannot change. Most people believe in heaven, few people believe in Hell. The demise of absolute truth has birthed the end of absolute consequences.

Our subject today is a sober one, and it is very counter-cultural – even in Evangelical Christianity. Don't get me wrong. If I'm going to err, I'd want to be on the side of forgiveness, reconciliation, second-chances, and hope. But we have to acknowledge that parallel to the passages loaded with mercy are scary texts that are meant to wake us up, to shock us.

Matthew 12:22-32 is such a text. So let me ask you a question: What would you do if you knew that there was one sin from which you could never, ever receive forgiveness? How would you think about that issue if you knew that once you crossed that line there is no going back?

Today we are going to talk about the one unforgivable sin. I'm going to attempt to answer two questions:

1. **What is the unforgivable sin?**
2. **How should we live in light of it?**

In order to answer those two questions, we need to understand the context in which Jesus' hard statement was made because it informs the conclusions that we'll draw.

The Hard-Hearted Pharisees

We are in the middle of a section called Portraits of Jesus, and we've seen an increasing hostility to Jesus in chapters 11 and 12. Jesus has rebuked the cities that didn't receive his teaching (11:20-24), asserted his greatness over the temple (12:1-6), and claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath (12:7-14). The Pharisees are now decidedly committed to destroying him (12:14).

In this context a demon-oppressed man is brought to Jesus who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him. Verse 23 tells us about the response from the crowds: "And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" Translation: Could this be the Messiah?

What comes next is very telling and sets up Jesus' teaching. Verse 24 says, "But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."" The word Beelzebul means "lord of the house" or "lord of the heights," and it was used to describe supernatural powers or the devil himself.¹ The Pharisees could not deny that the man was healed, and they couldn't make the crowd stop being amazed. So they attributed Jesus' healing power to Satan. They observed a good deed, and they ascribed it to the Evil One. They willfully rejected what should be apparent because to believe that he did it would mean that he had supernatural power. They have to reject the repugnant idea of Christ's power and to justify it – in spite of the obvious miracle in front of them – they created a despicable solution that must have made heaven gasp.

To think that human beings would suggest that the Son of God was empowered by the Prince of Darkness is a dangerous statement. And Jesus proceeds to dismantle their spurious charge in verses 25-30. He makes three statements and then gives a summary before talking about the one unforgivable sin. Let's quickly look at these statements and the summary:

- 25-26 – Jesus indicates that their statement is **illogical**. It just doesn't make sense that Satan would cast himself out. "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste." Satan would be defeating himself – "How then will his kingdom stand?"

¹ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academics, 2008), 320.

- 27 – Jesus then shows them that their charge is **inconsistent**, because even the disciples of the Pharisees (“your sons”) cast out demons, and they are surely not suggesting that their followers are empowered by the devil as well.
- 28-29 – The final statement gets closer to the heart. The Pharisees cannot acknowledge that it is by the Spirit of God that Jesus does these miracles because if that was the case then they would have to acknowledge the coming of the kingdom of God through him. They were just **defiant**.
- 30 – Finally, there is a **summary** statement that leads into the text on the unforgivable sin. Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” He says the same thing two different ways in order to attack the spiritual passivity implicit in the Pharisees’ resistance. Jesus says if you are not a shepherd who is gathering sheep, then you are scattering them. If you are not with me, you are against me. In other words, there is no fence riding. Passivity in the form of deflective suggestions is active resistance.

The context is critical to understanding what Jesus is saying. The Pharisees cannot deny that a miracle has happened. Instead, they suggested illogically, inconsistently, and defiantly that Jesus is empowered, not by the Spirit, but by the devil. And their charge reflected a serious resistance of Jesus.

Jesus takes it one step further and uses this situation as an opportunity to talk about the unforgivable sin.

What Is the Unforgivable Sin?

Jesus connected the unforgivable sin to blasphemy against the Spirit:

“Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt 12:31-32).

Now this is not the only place in the New Testament where this issue is addressed. Both Mark and Luke communicate the same teaching:

“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mark 3:28-29).

“And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Luke 12:10).

All of these passages teach the same thing: While forgiveness is available for all sins, there is no forgiveness available for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy comes from two words that mean “to injure” and “to speak.” So this is some kind of evil speaking or vilification that is directed toward the Holy Spirit.

Now there are a number of things to note here to provide further color on this concerning issue:

- The overwhelming and normal disposition of God is to forgive through Christ every sin from which a person genuinely repents. Both Matthew and Mark expressly state this (Matthew – “every sin and blasphemy”, Mark – “all sins...and whatsoever blasphemies they utter”). This is important less you think that there are arbitrary limits on God’s grace or as if there is something that God is powerless to forgive.
- The specific nature of this sin is directly connected to the Holy Spirit. In all three texts the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is set apart in terms of consequences from blasphemy against Christ. Blasphemy against Christ can be forgiven as in the example of Peter’s denial of Christ (Matt 26:69). But to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is different.
- Whatever the sin against the Holy Spirit is, it is eternally serious. It is a sin that will not be forgiven (Luke 12:10) regardless of time - “in this age or the age to come” (Matt 12:32). It is an eternal sin (Mark 3:29). Therefore the person who commits this sin “never has forgiveness” (Mark 3:29).

There are a number views as to what this sin is. Some have taken it to mean a relapse into sin after a person receives Christ, but there are far too many verses that clearly teach the eternal security or perseverance of those who are genuinely converted. Others have suggested that it is sin that is not forgivable in this lifetime, implying a purgatory-like purification that is needed in the next. Beyond the fact that the Bible nowhere teaches a purgatory purification, there is the simple fact that Matthew said that this sin will not be forgiven in this life or the life to come.

Yet another view is to see this sin as unbelief, stating that a failure to believe in Jesus is the one sin that is really unforgiven if it is not repented of before one dies. This gets closer to the mark, but it still is not convincing because the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit has an immediate and eternal context (“will not be forgiven in this age or the age to come”). Unbelief can be forgiven in this lifetime. Therefore, I don’t think that unbelief is what Jesus is talking about.

So what is this sin? Here's a helpful definition: *"The unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that he withdraws forever with his convicting power so that one is never able to repent and be forgiven."*²

In other words, it is not that Christ's death is insufficient for this sin, but it is that fact that the person who commits this sin is beyond repentance and thus beyond forgiveness. He or she has seen a clear demonstration of the power Christ through the Holy Spirit; there is clear rejection of who Christ is despite the overwhelming and clear evidence; and there is such hardness of heart that there is nothing new to learn, see, or believe.

What is it about this sin that makes the person beyond the reach of repentance? The answer is directly connected to the role of the Holy Spirit, and it explains why it is this sin that is not forgiven. The Holy Spirit plays a very critical role in bringing people to salvation. It is the Holy Spirit that opens people's eyes, regenerates them, grants them repentance, convinces people of sin, and reveals Christ as Lord to them (see John 3:6, 6:63, 2 Cor 3:6, 1 Cor 12:3). So while the Father planned redemption and the Son accomplished it, it is the Holy Spirit who empowers it in the hearts of people. Salvation doesn't happen without the Spirit.

Therefore to taste and see the power of the Holy Spirit, to see the full disclosure of Christ, and then to reject the Spirit's work as nothing more than demonic influence is to remove oneself from the only one who can actually bring repentance. In the same way that Christ is the only means of salvation the Spirit is the only means of repentance.

Let me take you back to the definition again: *"an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that he withdraws forever with his convicting power so that one is never able to repent and be forgiven."*

It is not just that they are not able to repent. It is that the Holy Spirit withdraws the conviction such that they never will repent. And if there is no repentance; there is no forgiveness. That is why this sin toward the Holy Spirit and in reference toward Christ is the one unforgivable sin.

Maybe an illustration will help:

Imagine a man who buys a new house, and he has never known the beauty and pleasures of an outside water spigot. He grew up with outside wells, the kind that you pump by hand and carry water in a bucket. He is dismayed that his home is not well-equipped, and so he begins to research how to dig a well. As the heat of summer comes he grows increasingly anxious about his yard because it is showing signs of being parched. He notices that his neighbors have green lawns, and he inquires as to what kind of well they have only to discover that they all have water spigots with hoses. His neighbor even walks him back home and shows him how to

² John Piper – "Beyond Forgiveness: Blasphemy against the Spirit", April 1, 1984 (www.desiringgod.org).

hook up hose, turn it on, and use it. But the stubborn man believes in his heart that pump water has to be better. He refuses to bend to the pressure of using a spigot. He continues to research a back-yard pump. And all the while his grass is dying. Finally, at the end of the summer and after he's exhausted all his options, he walks over to his spigot to turn it on. Only to discover that over the summer the valve has rusted; it is frozen shut. His stubborn heart conspired with time and rust to cut him off from the sources of life for his lawn.

But now imagine an even worse and more tragic scenario: Imagine a man who knows about the spigot but refuses to use it. He is so convinced that backyard pumps are better that no amount of begging or pleading by family or friends, and no amount of evidence is going to convince him. This hardening is not just the hardening of a spigot; this is the hardening of a heart.

That brings us to our last question.

How do we live in light of this passage?

This is an important question because, after all, Matthew tells us about this teaching of Jesus for a reason. I think that there are three words that capture what we need to do: Gasp, Grapple, and Glory.

Gasp

As I wrote this sermon I found myself trembling at times. If you do not read this warning and gasp at the sober reality of what it means, you probably have not fully understood it. Jesus issues a warning here that is intended create a spiritual gasp, realizing that it is no small thing that there is sin that a person could commit from which there would be no return. That is a nightmare, but it is not a dream.

Further, it ought to make us gasp that Jesus said this to spiritual people. You see, it is far more likely that those near spiritual things, who see spiritual things, and even are a part of spiritual things would commit this sin. It is the spiritually proud crowd who most often rejected Jesus. The profile of the person who commits this sin is like a person with lots of religious lingo, background, and knowledge. And that is the problem. He or she knows so much that he or she is last person to know that they've grieved the Holy Spirit.

Grapple

Did the Pharisees actually commit this sin? I don't know. Jesus never says. But he warns them, and Matthew tells all of us about this sin. Now let me be clear. I do not think that a genuine believer could commit this sin since. But I also think that if you understand what is going on here it has to produce in you a level of heart-searching and a healthy sense of fear of

what sin can do. Just because a true believer couldn't commit this sin doesn't mean that some level of hardening, to a lesser degree, couldn't happen. We are warned in Hebrews 3:13 about the dangers the deceitfulness of sin creating a hardening of the heart. Agree with the Hymn writer:

"O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above"

Yet take comfort in the hope that God's sealing is as irrevocable too. "We may be reasonably sure that those who fear they have committed it and worry about this and desire the prayers of others for them, have not committed it."³

Glory

Finally, in the midst of a do-over and come-back culture, this teaching reminds all of us about the dire consequences of sin. It is a sober reminder that sin is a big deal. Without God's mercy through his Son and the Spirit, all sin would be unforgivable. Forgiveness through the cross is not the norm in the universe. Normal is permanent, irrevocable punishment.

Therefore this passage should cause you to tremble and to think. But it should also call you to bask in the glory of redemption – to thank God that by His Spirit your eyes were opened to see the full reality of who Jesus Christ really is, to marvel at the conquering of your heart, and to rejoice that even when you were dead in our trespasses God made you alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:5).

May God help us to gasp, grapple, and glory in this hard teaching that shows all the more clearly the beauty of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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³ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 509.