

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #91: WHAT IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?

By John Temples

Is there really a sin that God will not pardon? Read these two sobering passages of Scripture which speak of a sin that has no forgiveness:

Matthew 12:22-32--“Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’ Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, ‘This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.’ But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad. Therefore I say to you, *every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. 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.*”¹

Mark 3:22-30: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebub,’ and, ‘By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.’ So He called them to Himself and said to them in parables:

¹ The likely meaning of “this age or the age to come” is “the Jewish dispensation or the Christian dispensation.”

‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself, and is divided, he cannot stand, but has an end. No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. And then he will plunder his house. *Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation*’ — because they said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”

In these two passages, Jesus plainly spoke of a sin that:

- “Will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”
- “Never has forgiveness”
- Makes one “subject to eternal condemnation”

It is clear, therefore, that there is such a thing as “unpardonable” sin. Note, please, the distinction between “unpardonED” sin and “unpardonABLE” sin. The vast majority of sins God will pardon when we comply with His terms and conditions for forgiveness; but Jesus declared that there is one sin God will NOT pardon.

What is this sin? Here are some characteristics of this sin which will help us in identifying it:

- It is a sin of the tongue--it is committed with the mouth, while originating in the heart or mind.
- It is directly and particularly against the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Godhead. In both references, Jesus calls it “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.”
- It is connected with the miracles Jesus did. In both Scripture passages, Jesus had just cast a demon out of a possessed person.

SOME THINGS THAT ARE NOT THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Is rejecting the gospel the unpardonable sin? No. If it is, then most of us would be lost! Many, yea, even most of us did not obey the gospel the first time we heard it. Many times, Paul preached to the same audience multiple times before some obeyed the gospel.² Also, rejecting the gospel would really be more of a sin against Christ, not the Spirit. Would it be possible to reject the gospel so many times that it no longer has any effect? Yes, but God never closes the door until we close it. Rejecting the gospel is unpardonED sin, not unpardonABLE sin.

Is murder, or adultery, or some other sin of the flesh the unpardonable sin? No--even the murders of Christ were among those pardoned on Pentecost (Acts 2:22-23). In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul listed a litany of grossly immoral sins (fornication, adultery, homosexuality, stealing, extortion, etc.) and said "such were some of you"--but they, Paul said, were pardoned.

Is apostasy (forsaking the church after having become a Christian) the unpardonable sin? No. If it is, then every time we offer an invitation to those who have fallen away to return to Christ, we are offering them a vain hope. In Galatians 5, Paul plainly stated that some had "become estranged from Christ" and had "fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). Yet, he said nothing about their being unable to return. In Galatians 6:1, he even urged faithful Christians to restore those overtaken in a trespass. But what about Hebrews 6:4-6, which states that it is impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away? What makes their repentance "impossible" is not God's unwillingness to pardon them; it is the fact that their prolonged and deliberate apostasy from the truth has seared their consciences and hardened their hearts such that they cannot believe the truth. Again, apostasy is unpardoned sin, not unpardonable sin. Isaiah 55:7 declares, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly_pardon."

² When Paul preached to the philosophers and skeptics on Mars Hill in Athens, the Bible says "some mocked, while others said, 'We will hear you again on this matter.'" If rejecting the gospel is the unpardonable sin, Paul would have said to them, "Sorry, you only get one chance."

Is “the sin unto death” that John spoke of the unpardonable sin? No. 1 John 5:16-17 says, “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. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.”

John here speaks of two types of sin: sin that leads to spiritual death, and sin that does NOT lead to spiritual death. But what is “sin that leads to death”? It must be *any sin of which a brother will not repent*. We may intercede and pray in behalf of a brother or sister who is penitent and seeks forgiveness. Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” And James says, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16). But these passages teach us that if one will not repent, we may not ask God to forgive him.

Brother Guy N. Woods explains: “This passage [1 John 5:16] is not to be confused, as is often done, with Matthew 12:32-32, ‘the sin against the Holy Spirit’.... In the event of sin in [a Christian’s] life, there is ‘an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.... The apostle’s teaching on the theme is thus:.... (1) The Lord will forgive every sin, of whatever nature, that a brother confesses (1 John 1:8). (2) There is, however, a sin which the Lord will not forgive (1 John 5:16). (3) Therefore, the sin which the Lord will not forgive, is simply *a sin, any sin, all sin that a brother will not confess!*” (Guy N. Woods, Gospel Advocate Commentary on 1 John, pages 320-322.)

WHAT THEN IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?

Read again Matthew 12:22-32 and Mark 3:22-30. The unpardonable sin is:

- A sin of blasphemy (speaking evil of divinity).

- It is committed with the mouth (the heart, of course, causing the mouth to speak).
- It is peculiarly and particularly against the Holy Spirit.
- It has to do with the miracles of Christ.

The only thing done on the occasion spoken of in the texts that meets all these criteria is when the scribes and Pharisees said that Jesus cast out demons by the power of the devil. They could not (and did not) deny that a miracle had been done; the proof was obvious. In their exasperation, they chose to blaspheme the source of Christ's miraculous power, since they could not deny the demonstration and reality of it. They conceded that Jesus performed miracles, but claimed that it was the devil who enabled Him to do such. They said, "He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons He casts out demons." THIS WAS CALLING THE HOLY SPIRIT THE DEVIL. THIS WAS (IS) THE UNPARDONABLE SIN. Mark 3:29-30 confirms this definition: "He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness...because they said, *'He has an unclean spirit.'*"

Commentator Adam Clarke concurs: "Even personal reproaches, revilings, persecutions against Christ, were [forgivable]; but blasphemy, or impious speaking against the Holy Spirit was to have no forgiveness: i.e. *when the person obstinately attributed those works to the Devil, which he had the fullest evidence could be performed only by the Spirit of God*. That this, and nothing else, is the sin against the Holy Spirit, is evident from the connection in this place, and more particularly from Mark 3:28-30. 'All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme; but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation; BECAUSE they said, He hath an unclean spirit.' Here the matter is made clear beyond the smallest doubt--the unpardonable sin, as some term it, is neither less nor more than ascribing the miracles Christ performed, by the power of God, to the spirit of the Devil." (Comments on Matthew 12:31)

SOME QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Is this sin really unpardonable? Yes, if language means anything. Jesus plainly distinguished between pardonable sin and unpardonable sin, saying "...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men" (Matthew 12:31). In Mark 3:29, He said this sin "never has forgiveness."

Why did the Lord pronounce this sin as unpardonable? For one thing, it was a direct insult to a member of the Godhead. Also, witnessing a divine miracle of healing, and then ascribing that healing to Satan, demonstrates a hardness of heart beyond the pale. The miracles of Jesus were the foremost proofs of His divinity (John 20:30-31). If the assertion of the Jews had been allowed to stand, it would have undermined the Lord's entire mission.

Did these Jews actually commit the unpardonable sin, or was Jesus just warning about the potential for committing it? Yes, they actually committed it. These Jews deliberately and consciously denied a plain fact in the face of incontrovertible evidence. In doing so, they defied all common sense and logic. They insulted the Spirit of grace. They did not just make an ignorant mistake; they expressed a deeply rooted, ongoing hatred of the Lord.

Could the unpardonable sin be committed today? Commenters are divided on this. Some would say no, it cannot be committed today; this was a singular sin committed by the Pharisees during Jesus's ministry. Jesus is no longer on earth performing miracles, and there is no other mention of this sin after Christ's resurrection. Others (myself included) would say yes, it is possible to commit the unpardonable sin today, but the bar is high. If we deny Christ's humanity or divinity, that can be forgiven. If we deny that He performed genuine miracles, that can be forgiven. Even if we blaspheme God or Christ, we can be forgiven. But if, having read the inspired eyewitness accounts of the miracles of Christ in the New Testament, we affirm and agree that Jesus did real miracles and yet say that the spirit which empowered Him to do them was Satan, have we not blasphemed the Holy Spirit?

Let us be clear about blasphemy: many of us have probably been guilty of it. But we need not fear having committed the unpardonable sin unless we have reached the same degree of hardness of heart as the Jewish leaders possessed and affirm exactly what they affirmed. Paul said, "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13).

What great mercy God extends to us, that even after we have maligned His name, we can be forgiven! What great love Christ holds out to us, offering to pardon us even after we have blasphemed His holy name! But God will not let it pass if we say "yes, I believe and know that Jesus performed miracles; but He did it by the power of the devil." --John Temples

POSTSCRIPT: For additional study and information on this subject, I urge you to read this scholarly article by brother Wayne Jackson at the Christian Courier website:

<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/894-what-is-the-eternal-sin>