

The Unpardonable Sin

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What is the meaning of the unpardonable sin, or the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12, Mark 3, Luke 12)? How does the unpardonable sin relate to the exhortation of Ephesians 4:30 not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and the exhortation of 1 Thessalonians 5:19 not to quench the Spirit?

Thank you!

The question of the unpardonable sin has puzzled and troubled Christians for some time. With the biblical emphasis on the greatness of God's mercy to penitent sinners, it seems out of place to speak of a sin that God will *not* forgive. For example, in Isaiah 55:7 we read, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." In the Old Testament God forgives his people of dreadful sins: David is perhaps the most famous example, for he was forgiven of adultery and murder (Psalms 32 and 51). In the New Testament Jesus prays for, and obtains, pardon for those who crucified him (Luke 23:34), he pardons the dying thief (v. 43), and some 3,000 souls are pardoned at Pentecost (Acts 2:38, 41). In Corinth there were some who were "washed, sanctified, and justified" from a whole litany of sins: adultery, fornication, homosexuality, theft, drunkenness, and the like (1 Cor. 6:9-11). John writes that the blood of Christ cleanseth us from "all sin" and that God will cleanse us from "all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7, 9).

And yet Jesus speaks of a certain sin that "shall not be forgiven...neither in this world, neither in the world to come" (Matt. 12:32). In this life, God will not forgive this sin; and on the Last Day this sin will be the ground of everlasting condemnation for the one who has committed it. From this sin, therefore, there is no possibility of repentance, and no possibility of pardon. (Incidentally, this text does not even hint at the foolish heresy of purgatory, as if certain sins could be pardoned in the world to come. Jesus states it this way in order to emphasize the impossibility of forgiveness for this sin).

This sin is mentioned in Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; and Luke 12:10. Matthew gives the fullest treatment: therefore, we will concentrate our explanation on that passage. The first thing to do with a difficult passage is to consider the context. In this passage, Jesus is contending with the Pharisees. In verse 22 Jesus heals a blind and dumb demon-possessed man with the result that the people are amazed: "Is not this the son of David?" they ask (v. 23). The Pharisees, moved with malicious envy, retort, "This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils" (v. 24). In response to that accusation, that Jesus is in league

with Satan in his saving work, Jesus warns about the “unpardonable sin,” calling it “the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost” (v. 31).

We should notice a few things about this sin. First, Jesus does not say that the Pharisees had actually committed it: he warns them that by their conduct they are coming perilously close to it. They are “in danger of eternal damnation” (Mark 3:29). Second, this sin is a transgression of the tongue, for it involves wicked speech. In verse 31 Jesus speaks of “all manner of sin and blasphemy,” which he then defines in verse 32: “but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost.” Therefore, blasphemy is to speak against, or to speak contemptuously or disparagingly of, the Holy Spirit. Third, this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not unrelated to Jesus, for the context shows that the Pharisees were in danger of committing this sin by their wicked attribution of the miracles of Jesus to the operation of the devil, rather than to the workings of the Spirit. In verse 28 Jesus challenges their unbelief, “But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.”

But we need to say more about this sin. Jesus seems to make a difference between the three persons of the Trinity: blasphemy against God (the Father) and against the Son is pardonable (v. 32), but blasphemy against the Spirit is unpardonable? And what kind of blasphemy does Jesus have in mind? What of the former cult member, such as a Jehovah’s Witness, who denied the deity and personality of the Spirit? If he comes to faith in the triune God, is he not pardoned of his former transgressions?

This is where a second principle of Bible interpretation is useful. We have examined the context, and now we compare Scripture with Scripture. Are there any other passages that speak of unpardonable sins or sins from which a person cannot repent? The reader suggests Ephesians 4:30 (“Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God”) and 1 Thessalonians 5:19 (“Quench not the Spirit”), but I would suggest a couple of passages from Hebrews: “For it is impossible for those who... were made partakers of the Holy Ghost... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance” (6:4-6) and “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath... done despite unto the Spirit of grace?” (10:29). In the Hebrews passages we have clear references to people who partook of spiritual privileges, but they despised them. We have a fearful description of people who came very, very close to the kingdom of God, but who perish. Such people blaspheme the Holy Spirit and commit the unpardonable sin, that is, the sin from which there is no repentance, a sin in which God hardens them and destroys them.

Arminians appeal to these two passages in support of their heresy of the falling away of true saints. In so doing, they teach that the people in Hebrews 6 and 10 are *true believers*. According to the Arminian these people were regenerate, justified, and sanctified, but they did not persevere in faith and good works. Therefore, they perished. But that is *not* what the two passages say: the writer carefully avoids the language of regeneration, justification, and salvation. Instead, he speaks of enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift, tasting the good word of God, tasting the powers of the world to come, and partaking of the Holy Spirit (6:4-5), from which they “fall away” (6:6). In Hebrews 10:29 he speaks of being “sanctified” (but not washed or redeemed) by the blood of the covenant. These expressions fall short of actual, spiritual

salvation, God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, and everlasting life. In addition, the context of Hebrews 6 helpfully contrasts what the apostates had with what true believers enjoy: "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and *things that accompany salvation*, though we thus speak" (v. 9).

Therefore, we understand what the writer to the Hebrews writes about: he writes of church members, who enjoy very elevated spiritual experiences in the church, who come very close to the work of the Spirit in the church, but who are not truly converted, and who never believe. Such people make an external profession of faith for a time: they are baptized, they partake of the Supper, they hear the preaching and it even moves them, they occupy ecclesiastical office, and they even exercise some of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit: they perform miracles, or miracles are performed on them; they prophesy; and they speak in tongues.

Nevertheless, they fall away. For despite all of their vaunted experiences, they merely "tasted" these things. And having tasted them, they reject them. And having departed from the church, where the Spirit works, they speak evil against the Spirit: they tread Christ's blood underfoot and they do despite to the Spirit (10:29); they crucify to themselves (to their own hurt) the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame (6:6). They blaspheme by their life and lip the Spirit of God: they mock their earlier Christian profession and became avowed enemies of the gospel and of the church. Now we understand that Jesus does not make the Spirit more glorious than the Father or the Son (as if blaspheming him were more serious than blaspheming the other two persons of the Trinity): he speaks of the Spirit *because the Spirit works salvation in God's children*. To blaspheme the Spirit's work is to blaspheme the work of the Father and the Son, whose work it is. And that is exactly what the people in Hebrews 6 and 10 do; and that is exactly what the Pharisees were in danger of doing.

Such people commit the unpardonable sin: "It is impossible... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance" (Heb. 6:4, 6). They cannot repent because they are hardened in sin; no one can persuade them to repent, not even the elders who work with them before they depart from the church; and God himself does not grant them repentance. For them "there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26-27).

You see, of course, that the texts in Hebrews prove too much for the Arminian: he needs a text where a saint falls away, perhaps multiple times in a lifetime, but is restored time and time again. Here we have a text that teaches irreversible, irrevocable apostasy, for the apostate is not a saint, but a hypocrite.

Therefore, blasphemy against the Spirit is never an accidental sin, a slip of the tongue as it were. Nobody who commits this sin calls the pastor worried about his soul, for such a person is hardened in sin: he does not want to repent; he mocks the very idea of repentance. Sensitive souls sometimes think that they might be guilty of this sin, but if you think you have committed this sin, and the thought troubles you, know of a certainty that you have *not* committed this sin. God will keep you, beloved Christian, from this sin! Therefore, do not despair, but believe. He

that believes will be forgiven, no matter what sins he has committed, even if he thinks (wrongly) that he has committed this sin.

To commit this sin requires knowledge, which is why Jesus warns the Pharisees: they had seen his miracles; they had even experienced something of his own power “up close and personal,” as it were. Their contemptuous words and thoughts brought them very close to this sin. They must repent! One today in the church who despises the work of Christ, which is the work of the Spirit, needs to be warned against this sin: do not continue along that road, lest you reach the point of no return, when you fall away from the good things that you have tasted in his church. God will use such warnings to keep his people from that sin. The reprobate in the church will despise such warnings to their eternal ruin.

Therefore, the unpardonable sin is not the “grieving” or the “quenching” of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30 and 1 Thess. 5:19). While these are sins against the Holy Spirit, they are not unpardonable sins against the Holy Spirit, nor do they constitute blasphemy against him. In both cases, Paul warns against sins that the saints in those churches were *already committing* (the Greek uses the present tense). If they were committing the unpardonable sin, he would not address them as saints, not would they have any interest in reading his letter. The context of Ephesians 4 shows that “corrupt communication,” “bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking, and malice” grieve the Holy Spirit. In *Canons* 5:5 we learn that by our “enormous sins” we “grieve the Holy Spirit,” yet the next article promises deliverance from such sins (*Canons* 5:6). Quenching the Holy Spirit is related to the despising of prophesyings (1 Thess. 5:20), which in our modern context is the despising of the faithful preaching of the gospel. We despise the preaching by refusing to listen to and obey the preaching. We despise the preaching by criticizing and judging it instead of humbling ourselves under it and seeking to learn from it.

Grieving and quenching the Spirit are serious sins from which we must repent (from which we *can* and *do* repent by the grace of God), but they are not the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

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