

What is the unpardonable sin?

By Dr. Jim Denison

A church member once wrote to me that she "ran across this Scripture last night and it troubled me so much I could barely sleep." The passage is Matthew 12:31-32, dealing with "blasphemy against the Spirit." The reader continues, "Am I to interpret this to mean that if you have blasphemed God you can never be forgiven? I have not always been a Christian and have had times in my life when I did not walk with God and doubted his power and authority. I have also doubted God's intercession in certain events, like miraculous healings. Does this mean that I have blasphemed the Spirit and thereby am not saved?" She asks very real, personal, and important questions.

So, what is the unpardonable sin? Let's discuss this difficult subject, and learn what difference the answer makes to our lives today.

What is this sin?

We'll begin by understanding Jesus' words on our subject. Our Lord has just healed a demon-possessed man; the crowds think he might be the Messiah, but the Pharisees say that he drives out demons by the devil himself. So Jesus responds, "the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (v. 31). He repeats his warning: "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (v. 32).

Peter could deny Jesus, Thomas could doubt him, and Paul could persecute his followers, yet they could be forgiven. But "blasphemy against the Spirit" cannot be forgiven, now or at any point in the future. This is the "unpardonable sin."

So, what is this sin? Let's set out what we know. We know that Christians cannot commit this sin. 1 John 1:9 is clear: "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." "All" means all. No sin is unpardonable for a Christian.

We know that this sin relates to the work of the Holy Spirit in regard to unbelievers. Jesus is warning the Pharisees, those who rejected him, that they are in danger of this sin. So what does the Spirit do with non-Christians?

- He convicts them of their sin and need for salvation: "When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin, and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me" (John 16:8-9).
- He tells them about Christ their Savior: "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me" (John 15:26).
- He explains salvation: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

- When they confess their sins and turn to Christ, the Spirit makes them God's children: "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ...And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Romans 8:9, 11).

In short, the Holy Spirit leads lost people to salvation.

So we know that it is the "unpardonable sin" to refuse the Spirit's work in leading you to salvation. To be convicted of your sin and need for a savior, but refuse to admit it. To be presented the gospel but reject it.

Why is this sin unpardonable? Because accepting salvation through Christ is the only means by which our sins can be pardoned. It is "unpardonable" to reject the only surgery which can save your life, or the only chemotherapy which can cure your cancer. Not because the doctor doesn't want to heal you, but because he cannot. You won't let him. You have rejected the only means of health and salvation.

The unpardonable sin is rejecting the Holy Spirit's offer of salvation, and dying in such a state of rejection. Then you have refused the only pardon God is able to give you. Don't do that. Be sure you have made Christ your Lord, today.

What about suicide?

This subject inevitably raises a second and very difficult issue: what about suicide? So many people mistakenly believe that suicide is the unpardonable sin. What does the Bible teach about this tragic topic?

God's word consistently warns us that suicide is always wrong. Deuteronomy 30:19 is God's command, "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Job knew that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, that life and death are with God and not us (Job 1:21). Paul teaches us, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). And the sixth commandment is clear: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13).

God gives us life and he alone has the right to take it. It is always too soon to give up on life. God can always intervene, and often does. You're not done until God says you're done.

That said, why is suicide so often thought to be the "unpardonable sin"? Not because the Bible ever teaches this, for nowhere does God's word make this connection. Here's the story in brief.

- Eventually the Church came to separate "mortal" from "venial" sins. "Mortal" sins would condemn a person to hell, "venial" to Purgatory. Only by confessing a mortal sin could a person avoid hell.

- Murder, including self-murder, was one of these mortal sins. And of course a person could not confess this sin after committing it.
- So by logic, suicide was defined as the unpardonable sin. But nowhere does the Bible teach that this is so.

Suicide is always wrong, always a sin, and always a tragedy. It places far more grief and pain on family and friends than life would have. It takes into human hands a decision which is God's alone. It leads to judgment and loss of reward by God in eternity. But it is not the unpardonable sin. Those you care about who committed this sin are not in hell for having done so. Rejecting Christ is the unpardonable sin, and the only one.

Why do we doubt our salvation?

So don't doubt your salvation, if you've trusted in Christ. You cannot commit the "unpardonable sin," no matter what else you've done. And yet so many of us worry and wonder about the security of our salvation. Why?

We don't always "feel" saved. But nowhere does the Bible say how it feels to be a Christian. My sons are my sons even when they don't feel like it, because they were born that way. A Christian has been "born again" as God's child. Whether you feel like it today or not.

We still sin, and think that we may not be saved. But 1 John 1:8 teaches, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." The bumper sticker is right: "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven."

We have doubts and questions about our faith. But Jesus on the cross could cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). It takes as much faith to believe you're saved as it did to accept your salvation. You still haven't seen God or proven him beyond question. Doubts are normal. We can take them to God's Word and God's Son, and find the help we need.

And some of us don't know all the Bible promises about our salvation through God's grace:

- Jesus speaks of being "forgiven" by God, in Matthew 12:31. The Greek word means to remove the sin from the sinner, to free him or her from it. It literally means "to liberate," as in freeing a prisoner to leave the prison and live a new life.
- Grace is why Psalm 103:3 tells us that God forgives "all" our sins. It's why verse 12 promises that he separates our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. It's why Micah 7:19 assures us that he buries our sins in the depths of the sea. It's why Isaiah 43:25 tells us that God remembers these sins no more. All by grace.
- Grace is why Jesus tells us that "whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). It's why he says of his followers, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish" (John 10:28). It's why he says at the grave of Lazarus, "He who believes in me shall never die" (John 11:26). It's why

Paul rejoices to say, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). All by God's grace.

Paul knew this grace personally. The greatest persecutor of the church became its greatest apostle, by God's grace. And so in every letter Paul wrote, "grace" appears no later than the second sentence. As Frederick Buechner says, "Grace is the best Paul can wish them because grace is the best he himself ever received."

Conclusion

Have you received this grace? Do you know that you have asked Jesus to forgive your sins and become your Savior and Lord? If you're not sure and you reject this invitation to trust in him, you reject your only means of grace and salvation. And if this is your last chance, as it may be, your sin is unpardonable. If a thought in your mind says you can wait, know that it's a lie from your enemy. Every soul in hell for rejecting Christ thought he or she would have another chance.

If you know you have made Christ your Savior, be as burdened as God is for those you know who have not. Their rejection of Jesus must change or it will one day be unpardonable. You have been forgiven by God's grace. Will you pray by name for those who have not? Will you do all you can to see that they experience the same grace? And will you thank God for that grace today?

In his book, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, Ron Lee Davis tells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. Though he had confessed and repented of that sin, he still had no peace, no assurance of God's forgiveness.

In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ, and he with her. The priest was skeptical. To test her he said, "The next time you speak with Jesus, ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary." She agreed to do so.

A few days later he asked her, "Did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did," she replied. "And did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?" "Yes." "Well, what did he say?" "He said, 'I don't remember.'"

Thanks be to God.