

QUESTION 12: “WHAT IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?” (Matthew 12:22-32)

7.28.19

INTRODUCTION

Many times we may hear about somebody doing something that somebody else will consider unpardonable, meaning, “I will never forgive that.” We may hear that in the context of a marriage partner who has been unfaithful, or of a child predator who victimized untold numbers of kids, or of a serial killer. What all these have in common is the human response to what we view as essentially inhuman, unjustifiable, unforgivable wrongdoing.

But the Bible tells us about a greater sin, a sin so terrible that Jesus himself called it unpardonable and unforgivable. What is that, what is the unpardonable sin? That is our question today.

TEXT

Then they brought [Jesus] a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.” Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do you people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder the house. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man (Jesus) 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” — Matthew 12:22-32. OK; so let’s take a look at this story.

ANALYSIS

As happened often in his ministry, Jesus was brought a demon-possessed man, that possession having some visible, discernible effects — in this case, the guy was blind and mute as a result of this possession — and Jesus healed him. There were two reasons for Jesus’ healing ministry:

- 1) Jesus’ healing ministry showed the grace, the undeserved favor, of God being revealed through these healings. Nobody had to show they had earned healing; they simply presented their broken bodies to Christ, and he healed them. This was an incredible “visual aid” of the grace of God, who likewise asks for nothing from us but that we bring our spiritually broken bodies to him. As Paul said so well in writing to his friend Titus: ***For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people — Paul, Titus 2:11.*** That grace “appeared” in the person of Jesus Christ.
- 2) Jesus’ healing ministry showed by the power of such miracles the power that was behind the words that accompanied Christ’s ministry and, in fact, often accompanied his miracles. As he himself said: ***“The works I do in my Father’s name testify about me . . . Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father” — Jesus Christ, John 10:25b, 37-38.*** A great example of this is

the story of four friends bringing a paralyzed man to be healed by Jesus. When they couldn't get their friend to Jesus because of the density of the crowd that surrounded Christ, they improvised: they dug a hole in the roof over Jesus' head and lowered the man into his presence. Here's what happened next, according to Mark's gospel: ***When Jesus saw their faith (as shown by their determination to get their friend close to Jesus), he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*** Naturally there were some teachers of the law in the crowd as well; as Mark says, they ***were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*** But Mark tells us: ***Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I wanted you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" — Mark 2:5-10a.*** The power in his authority to heal was the same power found in his authority to teach. His words and his works reflected the same divine source: the power of God through his Holy Spirit.

The people who were witnessing these amazing deeds of Jesus continued to be astonished at what was happening right before their eyes. The promise of a "messiah" had been a part of their lives and their nation's hopes for centuries — literally all the way back to the beginning of time. God had initially told their father Abraham about a coming savior who would come from his family line and would bless the entire world. So now, with those promises in the backs of their minds as these amazing miracles happen right in front of them, they ask the question that has been percolating since Jesus first began making his presence known by these "signs and wonders": ***"Could this be the Son of David?" — Matthew 12:23b.*** Now the way this question is grammatically structured in the Greek, their expectation is for a negative answer, as in "No; of course not!" But people were also noticing something that they remembered from the ministry of John the Baptist: ***"Though John never performed a sign (such as what Jesus had been doing), all that John said about this man was true" — John 10:41b.***

The Pharisees and those in their company, upon hearing this, immediately set out to snuff out any such ideas from the people, and so they responded with the most gruesome picture they could paint of the "real" source of his power: Jesus, so they said, was able to command the spirits of Satan only because he himself was working with Satan: ***"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" — Pharisees, Matthew 12:24b.***

In Philistine culture, "Beelzebul" was a deity associated with satanic idolatry. By the time of Jesus, "Beelzebul" was often used in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke as another name for Satan. While the origin of this word or its meaning is still not completely clear to scholars today, what is clear is that the Pharisees meant this as an intensely wounding and publicly degrading insult to Christ: ***"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons" — Pharisees, Matthew 12:24b.***

Wow! That was a profoundly serious charge. They are saying that God's Son — Jesus Christ — is not only not any kind of heavenly being or messiah but, even more to the point than that, that Jesus Christ with is in fact himself demonic — in one sentence attempting to completely deny both the source of his power but, worst of all, the source of his very being. So how does Christ respond?

- 1) He first shows the absurdity of that argument and its logic: ***“If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:26.*** In other words, how can Satan accomplish anything if he is fighting against himself? And Jesus is saying, “Are you trying to say that I am fighting for Satan by fighting against him?”
- 2) Next, he reminds them of the power over demons that were exhibited in their day quite separate from the work of Jesus — including exorcisms conducted by Pharisees themselves. Were they going to attribute that ministry to Satan also?
- 3) Then Jesus tells them a mini-parable: ***“[H]ow can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:29.*** That, Jesus implies, is exactly what he IS doing to Satan.
- 4) He then hits them with a final alternative: If this is not Satan at work, how about this? ***“[I]f it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:28.*** All of a sudden, the parable becomes clear: Jesus is the one tying up the “strong man,” a reference to Satan. In other words, Jesus is — present tense — binding up Satan. Jesus is plundering Satan’s house by carrying off his possessions — people formerly under his control who are now becoming disciples of Jesus Christ and, therefore, children of the kingdom of God. Those are really the only two options: Either this is the work of Satan, or this is actually the work of God through Christ. And Jesus himself sums it up so well: ***“Whoever is not with me is against me” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:30a.*** When it comes to Jesus Christ, there is no middle ground.

But then comes the real meaning behind their charge, and it is awful in its implications: ***“And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 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” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:31-32.*** Before we look at the total picture of what this means, let’s check out a couple of definitions:

Sin — HAMARTIA (ham-ar-tee[^]-ah): literally, a “missing of the mark” (think archery), the most frequent word for sin in the NT. In Matthew 12:31, it refers to a sinful deed or an act of sin. The “mark,” the bullseye, that this word refers to is the perfection of God. Once sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, we are constantly “missing the mark”; it’s what Paul was saying in Romans 3: ***[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — Paul, Romans 3:23.*** It is this reality that Jesus Christ offers to change through his life of perfection that did hit God’s mark, in every area of life, in every way possible. In his love as demonstrated by his death for our sins on the cross, he offers us a trade: swapping our sinful lives for his sinless life. Upon surrendering our lives to him, Christ’s hitting all God’s marks of perfection is now granted to us. It is what Jesus is referring to when he says: ***“[E]very kind of sin and slander can be forgiven” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:31a.***

Blasphemy — BLASPHEMIA (blas-fay-me[^]-ah): speech that reflects contempt for God. This could show in two general areas:

- 1) Somebody claiming to be equal with God. This was the crime with which the Sanhedrin charged Christ at his “trial,” but it was also an accusation with which his enemies charged Jesus throughout his earthly ministry.

- a) When Jesus was brought the paralyzed man (through the roof) by the man's friends (that we've already mentioned), Mark tells us: ***When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" — Mark 2:5-7.***
 - b) When Jesus healed the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda, he did so on the Sabbath, and thus was condemned by the Jewish leadership for sinning by "working" on the Sabbath day. Jesus' response? ***"My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" — Jesus Christ, John 5:17b.*** As a result, as John tells us: ***For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God — John 5:18.***
 - c) In a memorable moment later in his ministry, Jesus had just told the "Jews gathered around him," ***"I and the Father are one" — Jesus Christ, John 10:30.*** As John goes on to say: ***Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" "We are not stoning you for any good work," they replied, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God" — John 10:31-33.***
- 2) Somebody knowingly rejecting the work of the Spirit of God. That is the blasphemy we have here. Jesus in all his miraculous works was clearly doing this fully within the power of the Holy Spirit. His opponents knew this, yet still fought against it. Worse yet, they attributed the work of God to the work of Satan — fully knowing that wasn't true. This blasphemy, knowingly rejecting God and his work, is the "unpardonable" sin to which Jesus is speaking. It speaks to a heart of somebody so hardened against God that repentance is no longer possible; in fact, repentance for this sin is not even sought. In the case of the Pharisees in this moment, their rejection was premeditated, persistent and an ongoing rejection of Jesus, both who he was and what he was doing. There are three realities that are highlighted by this sin:
- a) God created man with a free will; therefore, despite the fact that he desires that no one die separated from him, he honors the choices that mankind makes, even if those choices harden a heart beyond being redeemable. This is not a reflection of God's lack of power, but rather his honoring man's freedom to choose.
 - b) To blaspheme the Holy Spirit denies the process by which the Holy Spirit works — through new birth in Christ, regeneration of new life in Christ, and sanctification of a growing life becoming more Christ-like. What's more, denying the work of the Holy Spirit effectively removes yourself from the process of forgiveness that the Holy Spirit initiates. Doing this places yourself outside the process of salvation as well, making the experiencing of God's forgiveness impossible.
 - c) God is a God of justice. This level of response to God deserves the judgment of being unpardonable because it strikes at the very core of God's being: his pure, undefined, eternal holiness. To equate God with Satan is dishonoring to God beyond words. And to do so with full knowledge is a complete and total rejection of who God is. His just response is to declare that sin — and that sinner — unpardonable. As the writer of Hebrews said so graphically: ***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.***

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? — Hebrews 10:26-29.

APPLICATION

So, two thousand years and change later, what does this mean? A couple of things:

- 1) It is a reminder of the amazing grace of God to see the incredible range of sins that ARE forgiven by him. As Paul told the Corinthian church: *[D]o you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were.* But Paul doesn't stop there; instead he continues with the beauty and breadth and depth of God's grace towards our sins: *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God — Paul, I Corinthians 6:9-11.* And as he confided to Timothy: *Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life — Paul, I Timothy 1:13-17.* The blasphemy that Paul references here was not the same as what the Pharisees were doing. Paul's was specifically (and by his own admission in ignorance) speaking against Jesus himself and his ministry — and Christ did say that speaking against him would be forgiven. Paul was the proof of that.
- 2) If you (or anybody you know) is worried about committing this sin, you haven't. Someone who has sinned in this way has no regrets; they are rejecting the Holy Spirit that leads them to conviction for their wrongs and feeling regret in the first place. If somebody feels convicted of sin, or feels pangs of guilt and sadness about something, that is proof that the unpardonable sin has not occurred. As Paul wrote in his second letter to the Christians at Corinth: *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret — Paul, II Corinthians 7:10a.* Anybody having this experience can rest assured that the unpardonable sin has NOT been committed.
- 3) Ultimately, all the inhabitants of future and final hell will have one striking common denominator: They will all be there because of their rejection of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They will have knowingly made a choice to reject repentance in favor of their own selfish desires. Hell is the culmination of that rejection. No one will be in hell because of things done in ignorance. Hell will be a place where everyone absolutely will understand who God is and how he has reached out to them. Their rejection will be their eternal sentence.

ONE ADDITIONAL DANGER: GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

When Paul was writing his letter to the Ephesian Christians, he said this: *[D]o not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption — Paul, Ephesians*

4:30. This is a repeating of the offense which the nation of Israel committed against God, as according to Isaiah, *they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit — Isaiah 63:10a*. So what is grieving the Holy Spirit?

It is a believer's sin, meaning that it is a sin that Christians commit. While it is not unpardonable, it shows a singular lack of complete surrender to Jesus Christ, arguing the path of our will over the path of his will. It is an incredibly dangerous place for a Christian to find themselves. It is offending God's Holy Spirit — a person, not a thing or an "it." To "grieve" means to make sad or sorrowful; it means to do something that causes sorrow or pain or upset. So what kind of behaviors would cause the Holy Spirit to be grieved? According to Paul in Ephesians 4:

- 1) ***Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths — Paul, Ephesians 4:29a.***
This idea of "unwholesome" here literally refers to something that has gone rotten. This would include any kind of obscene language, profanity, dirty or off-color stories or jokes. This kind of talk grieves the Holy Spirit, and should never be found in a Christian's mouth (or mind, for that matter). What talk does Paul commend to us? The verse continues: ***only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen — Paul, Ephesians 4:29b.*** Talking with others is a way of ministering to others, and serving others. Our talk to each other should always be positive, uplifting and reflective of Christ. How would we talk to somebody if Christ was listening? Guess what? He is!
- 2) ***Get rid of all bitterness — Paul, Ephesians 4:31a.*** Bitterness grieves the Holy Spirit. The idea of "bitterness" is "a resentful spirit that refuses to reconcile." In other words, bitterness is held on to, like a treasured possession. How sad when Christians comes to that place — and how grievous to the Holy Spirit, who is the origin of the unity of believers that is intended to be found in a gathering of Christians. What can make bitterness even scarier is that it can easily infect other Christians in the fellowship, like a cancer; the writers of Hebrews rightly said: ***See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many — Hebrews 12:15.***
- 3) ***Get rid of . . . rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice — Paul, Ephesians 4:31b.*** All of these behaviors additionally grieve the Holy Spirit. By rage, Paul is thinking of people who are easily angered and respond by raising their voices. By slander, Paul is focused on those who speak evil behind somebody's back. By malice, Paul is looking at those who would plan harm for somebody.

What brings joy to the Holy Spirit? Paul's final words in this chapter: ***Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you — Paul, Ephesians 4:32.***

Especially with a culture that has grown so adept at excusing behaviors, Christians have sometimes taken those skills inside the church doors; for instance:

- 1) Assuming if I'm the injured party, that I have the right to respond however I want, often meaning that anybody else would do what I'm thinking of doing.
- 2) Assuming I have the right whether or not I choose to forgive.
- 3) Assuming I'm always in the right, or that this circumstance is somehow the exception to the rule, and therefore I am the exception to the rule. No; you're not.

The other way to grieve the Holy Spirit is to utter the memorable words: “I know it’s wrong, but . . .” A picture of this is the many pastors I know who talk about doing premarital counseling. One of them doesn’t even start without first asking the question: Are you two already living together? The response 75-80% of the time? Yes — and most of those respondents are church kids, too. He won’t even start until they immediately change that arrangement. When did we ever start to think that God’s commands were optional, or meant for somebody else in some other circumstances, or that “everybody else is doing it” is now the standard? God, if you could see this from my point of view, you’d understand. Guess what? He does see — and the one who needs to change their perspective ain’t him! This one is scary because it is declaring that I know better than God, that my perspective is better than God, that my idea of ethics is better than God. C’mon, God; get with the times. Really? Do you honestly want to try and make that case before him?

Now all of the ways there may be to grieve the Holy Spirit have one thing in common: The more we do things because we think so, the harder it will continue to become to act as God thinks so. Simply put, the more we try to grab the “steering wheel” of our lives, the harder it will become to give it up and let God drive — the way he’s ALWAYS been meant to.

And how does God think?

- 1) ***Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! — Paul, II Corinthians 5:17.***
- 2) ***I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me — Paul, Galatians 2:20.*** That’s what pained Paul the most — those times when sin reared its ugly head in him and Christ was no longer seen as living in him (Romans 7). He agonized over that. He hated that. He didn’t tolerate the sin in his life; he was at war with it. Question: Is that our response to sin? Forget the wars in our culture; are we fighting the sin wars in our lives? Does it grieve us to grieve God, to grieve His Son, to grieve His Holy Spirit? Do we just let it go or do we run to God, begging for his forgiveness? Our response to our sins as Christians is a huge and frighteningly accurate barometer of who rules in our lives.
- 3) ***Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (the work of the Holy Spirit within you) — Paul, Romans 12:2a.***
- 4) Remember how, way back at the time of creation, as God prepared to end his creative process with the introduction of humanity into his new world, the Bible says: ***God created mankind in his own image — Genesis 1:27a.*** While sin has crippled that image, God through Jesus Christ seeks to restore that image by the birth of his Holy Spirit in the lives of the believer. That’s what Paul has in mind when he writes to the church in Rome that God desires that we ***be conformed to the image of his Son — Paul, Romans 8:29a.*** And as silly as this sounds, Jesus was ALWAYS Jesus. He himself was the image and reflection of God — in all he did, in all he said, in all he was. He didn’t change his behaviors or his attitudes based on who crossed his path, or who came into the room, or what time of day, or being tired or hungry or whatever. He always was who he was — ***“He who has seen me has seen the Father” — Jesus Christ, John 14:9b.*** In the same way, we are called to ALWAYS be who Christians are: becomers in him, slaves of him, reflections of him.

Why? What are these — and so many other verses — saying? If we are in Christ, we are new. We are different than we were before. In fact, we're not like anything we were before. If that's true, then how we act, how we think, how we respond, should be nothing like it's ever been before. Jesus Christ is supposed to make that much difference in our lives; that's the whole idea of being "new."

CONCLUSION ("CONTINUING EDUCATION")

What, then, should be our takeaway today? It is maybe to better understand what God's expectations for us are once we have become kids in his family. So what does that mean?

- 1) Not only are we to know God through Jesus Christ, but we are to grow in God through Jesus Christ. What is a huge part of that is Bible reading, Bible study, Bible memory — all that stuff. Think of it as our spiritual "continuing education". How in the world can we know what it means grow in the likeness of Christ if we don't ever read about his life, his temptations, his victories, his lessons? God gave us his word that we could learn all that stuff. God gave us his church, his family, to give us even more opportunity to learn and absorb what the life is about, from other Christians taking the same journey that we are. The idea that "I'm going to do the Christian life my way" is incredible wrong in its viewpoint. "Christian life" and "my way" aren't even on the same planet; they were never meant to be. The Christian life is not based on our good intentions or our own strength or own ideas. That's the stuff that got surrendered when our lives got surrendered. It's all Christ, and only Christ — that's the only way a Christian life can be lived; otherwise it ain't much Christian other than it ain't Muslim or Buddhist or whatever. If we have been crucified with Christ, like Paul said, then we're saying our old ways are dead. So, in the name of Jesus Christ and for the honor and glory of God, let them be dead!
- 2) God has not set the bar for how we are to live. He IS the bar. He is the holiness; he is the perfection. Jesus met that bar. Us? We can't meet that bar without Jesus. That is the ONLY way we can be seen in God's holy perfection — by surrendering to and living within the amazing life of Jesus Christ. That's an "all-or-nothing" proposition, folks. Anything less is sin; anything less "misses the mark."

The amazing grace is that God has given us all we need to live pleasing to him. That "all" is his Son. And of all the decisions this church family ever has to make, the only one that matters is: Whose life is this anyway? Whose life fills this body of believers? Whose life is reflected in this church family? The answer to those questions will never be anything less than the most important thing about us. Let's pray!