

The Only Unpardonable Sin

From the Gospel of Matthew

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Bible Text: Matthew 12:31-32; Hebrews 6:1-6

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Matthew chapter 12 and I want to read verses 22 through 32.

Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so that the mute man spoke and saw.

All the crowds were amazed, and were saying, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?”

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.”

And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any 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? If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason they will be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, 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. Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”¹

Let’s pray together.

Father, thank you for your Word. Thank you that your Word is a light to our path. Thank you that as we look into it and rightly interpret it we have your truth. And we thank you that you do give us your Word so that we are able to discern your truth. Open our eyes. Enlighten our minds. Pour out your Spirit upon us on this day that we might see your

¹ Matthew 12:22-32.

truth and love you and worship you and serve you as we ought. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

The author of the email was agitated and dismayed. In reading his Bible he had come across—and if my memory serves me correctly—he had come across Ezekiel 18:20 which says, in part, “If the man sins, he shall die.”²

And looking at the note in his Bible, the note made a connection with this verse to the unpardonable sin. And so I received an email from this fellow who indicated to me that he thought that he had committed the unpardonable sin. He was led in this direction by the note in his Bible. And unfortunately he didn’t read the next verse in the text in Ezekiel which says that if the sinner turns from his ways, his evil ways, and turns back to God he will be forgiven.³ So rather than looking at the note in his Bible, he should have read the next verse.

This is a little warning. The notes in your Bible are not infallible. The Bible itself is.

But at any rate, this man was deceived. He was fooled. He thought he had committed the unpardonable sin. And as a result he was quite agitated. But one of the reasons he was deceived was not only because of this note in his Bible, it was because he didn’t properly understand the nature of the unpardonable sin.

And I think this is often the case. We don’t properly understand the nature of the unpardonable sin. And so my effort this morning is to lay before you the nature of the unpardonable sin and to show you from the Bible that it is a quite observable and a quite concrete sin. It is the only unpardonable sin. All other sins are forgivable. All other sins are forgivable. This is what Jesus tells us.

So my point is: Don’t be fooled; there is only one unpardonable sin and all other sins are forgivable.

Let’s look at our text and some other texts. But first, let’s look at this text in Matthew chapter 12 and learn from our Lord.

First of all, verses 31 and 32.

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.⁴

² See Ezekiel 18:20.

³ See Ezekiel 18:21.

⁴ Matthew 12:31-32.

As you look at verses 31 and 32, you should realize, and it is quite obvious on the face of it, that this unpardonable sin is one. There is only one such sin. Jesus is not talking about an area of sin. Jesus is not talking about a category of sins. Jesus is quite specific. There is one sin to which he is addressing himself.

And as you look at the text you not only see that there is one sin, but you see that it is identifiable. It is specific. And this is part of the lesson for us this morning. There is one sin and it is identifiable and it is specific.

Again, look at verses 31 and 32. “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.”⁵

Jesus is zeroing in on a particular sin and he is categorizing it as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. You should take from this and that I should take from this that this sin is identifiable. There ought not to be a great mystery about it.

Verse 32 again. “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him.”⁶ If someone speaks against Christ it is observable. You can see it, correct? In a similar fashion, if someone blasphemes the Holy Spirit this is identifiable. You can observe the sin taking place. I think this is, in part, what Jesus is teaching us.

“But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”⁷

If this sin is so significant that it cannot be forgiven in this life or in the life to come, it would seem that we ought to know very specifically what it is. And Jesus does identify it for us or the Bible does identify it for us.

Let’s look at the context now and see where the context takes us. Jesus has been dealing with a blind man who was demon possessed and he heals the blind man. And then along come the Pharisees, verse 24. They counter what has taken place. They do so because the people were following Jesus. The Pharisees therefore counter what Jesus has been doing. They reinterpret the incident. “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.’”⁸

The name Beelzebul may be a name that conjures up the imagery of a false god. It may also conjure up the imagery, not only of a false god, but of what some have called the god of dung, the god of the dung heap. Now, the Pharisees are not calling Jesus Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. They are slandering the power by which Jesus casts out demons.

⁵ Matthew 12:31.

⁶ Matthew 12:32.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Matthew 12:24.

You notice the text again. “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘This man casts out demons only *by* Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.’”⁹

Jesus responds in verses 25 and 26.

And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any 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?”¹⁰

Jesus is connecting Satan with Beelzebul. This seems clear in the text.

In verse 27 he says, “If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?”¹¹ In other words, “Your sons are engaged, your own people are engaged, in exorcisms. By what power do they cast out demons? Is it by the power of Beelzebul? Would you say the same about them?”

Jesus is throwing the accusation back in their faces.

Verse 28. “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”¹²

You see the connection, of course. Jesus is actually casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the Pharisees are calling the power of the Holy Spirit the power of the devil. They are calling the power of the Holy Spirit the power of Satan. And they are attributing the title Satan, the title Beelzebul, to the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is clearly blasphemy. This is clearly slandering the Spirit. This is clearly denouncing the work of the Spirit and calling it that which it is not, calling it the work of the enemy, the arch enemy of God. It is, in a sense, cursing the work of the Spirit. This is the blasphemy that Jesus is speaking about, calling the work of the Spirit the work of the devil.

And so this sin is not only a specific sin but it is identifiable. One of the identifying characteristics of this sin is calling the work of the Spirit the work of the devil.

But there is something else important here in our text. The Lord Jesus Christ is born in Israel. He is born into the visible Church of his time. He is born an Israelite and that nation at that time constituted the visible Church in the world. And here comes Jesus Christ the very glory of God operating in the midst of the visible Church of that day casting out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. And the leaders of the Church— isn’t this a significant part of our text? Verse 24 again. “But when the Pharisees heard

⁹ Ibid., italics added.

¹⁰ Matthew 12:25-26.

¹¹ Matthew 12:27.

¹² Matthew 12:28.

this...”¹³ The leaders of the Church of that day accused Jesus of being filled with the spirit of the evil one. They say of his works, “They are the product of the power of the evil one.” They are doing this in the belly, in the heart, of the visible Church.

So it seems to me this is another characteristic of this unpardonable sin. It is not only a single sin which is observable and identifiable. It is a sin in which men and women slander the Spirit and call the work of the Spirit the work of the devil. In addition, they do so in the belly, in the heart, of the visible Church.

I hope you hear me on this because it seems to me that this is rather crucial to understanding this sin. It takes place in the heart of the visible Church. Now, I am not thinking of a cult here. I am not thinking of the apostate church here. I am thinking of the true body of Christ. This sin takes place in the midst of the true body of Jesus Christ. And an individual scoffs at the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the true body of Jesus Christ and calls the work of the Spirit in the true body of Christ the work of the devil.

Now if someone commits this sin, you see it, do you not? You can identify it. This is a very specific sin. This is what Jesus is teaching us.

Now the writer to the Hebrews confirms what we are talking about. If you would please turn with me to Hebrews chapter six, I would like to read the first six verses in Hebrews six.

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. And this we will do, if God permits. For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.¹⁴

This text also speaks about a sin committed in which individuals will not find repentance. And so we have a link with what Jesus speaks about in Matthew chapter 12. And who are these people?

Verse four. “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened...”¹⁵

You see, these are people who come into the worship of the Church and they receive from God the Holy Spirit, light, real light. You have experienced this sort of thing. I

¹³ Matthew 12:24.

¹⁴ Hebrews 6:1-6.

¹⁵ Hebrews 6:4.

have experienced this sort of thing. You are reading the Bible and all of the sudden the lights go on. You say, “Aha, I get it.” These are people that receive real light from God.

Verse four again. “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit...”¹⁶

They have tasted heaven. How can individuals get a taste of heaven? You have to come into a group of people worshipping together just like this body of believers. You have to come into the company of believers, into the worship of God’s people, to get a real taste of heaven. This is what worship is about, tasting of heaven and tasting of the age to come. And these people have done this. “And [they] have tasted the good word of God.”¹⁷ They have come into the assembly of God’s people and have listened to the Word of God and gotten a taste of the good things about which the Word of God speaks. These are the kind of people that we are talking about.

Then Hebrews 6:6 says, “And then have fallen away.”¹⁸

Well, the question immediately is: How can a person who has really tasted of the Spirit of God, how can a person who has tasted of the age to come, how can a person who has received light from the Holy Spirit walk away from all of this?”

We read about this in the Larger Catechism. Look at your bulletin. Question 68 in the Larger Catechism. “Are the elect only effectually called?”¹⁹ That is, are only the elect called with a calling that really draws them to Christ?

Answer: “All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the Word, and have some common operations of the Spirit.”²⁰

If you look at an edition of the Larger Catechism that has the proof texts, you will find that one of the proof texts for the common operations of the Spirit is Hebrews chapter six. In other words, receiving light from the Spirit is something that someone who is not born again may experience.

“All the elect, and they only, are effectually called; although others may be, and often are, outwardly called by the ministry of the Word, and have some *common operations* of the Spirit; who, for their willful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ.”²¹

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hebrews 6:5.

¹⁸ Hebrews 6:6.

¹⁹ Westminster Larger Catechism Question 68.

²⁰ Westminster Larger Catechism Answer 68.

²¹ Ibid., italics added.

So it appears from the perspective of Hebrews and from the perspective of the Westminster Larger Catechism, it is possible for individuals to receive real light from the Spirit and to taste of the age to come and not be born again.

Do you remember what Jesus said in the parable of the soils? That there is some seed that falls along the edge of the road and that seed is like the Word of God coming into a heart that receives it with joy, that receives it with joy, but then the pressures of the world come in and what does the individual do? He walks away.²²

I want you to see an example of this in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 10. You may remember from the old Testament reading, this is the incident in which Saul is anointed King by Samuel. And Samuel gives Saul certain signs that will take place to indicate that he actually is to be king. He has been a shepherd. We break into the narrative at verse nine in 1 Samuel 10.

“Then it happened when he turned his back to leave Samuel...”²³ That is, Saul turned his back to leave Samuel after Samuel had anointed him and given him instructions. “Then it happened when he turned his back to leave Samuel, God changed his heart.”²⁴ God changed Saul’s heart.

Now I want you to notice something very important about the language here. It says, “God changed his heart.”²⁵ It does not say, “God gave him a new heart.” It doesn’t use this terminology. The Holy Spirit is not making a mistake here in inspiring this passage. Saul is not given a *new* heart. Being given the new heart is very specific covenantal language. When you are born again you are given a new heart. But the text is very specific. God changed Saul’s heart. He does not give Saul a new heart.

And all those signs came about on that day. When they came to the hill there, behold, a group of prophets met him; and the Spirit of God came upon him mightily, so that he prophesied among them.²⁶

I commend to you the exposition of this passage by Matthew Henry. God changed Saul’s heart from being that of a shepherd to that of being a king. And then the Spirit of God came upon him. And what did he do? He prophesied. And so there arose the question. “Is Saul among the prophets?”²⁷ The people were astonished that this had taken place.

Now what else do we know about Saul? Well, we know that Saul, just a little bit later, defies Samuel and is disobedient. He goes up to the altar and acts as a priest, which he should never have done, and offers sacrifice. He is disobedient to Samuel. And more importantly, he is disobedient to God.

²² See Matthew 13:20-21.

²³ 1 Samuel 10:9.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ 1 Samuel 10:9-10.

²⁷ See 1 Samuel 10:12.

And Samuel utters those words to Saul that ring in his ears and ring in our ears today. “Obedience is better than sacrifice.”²⁸

Then God took the kingdom away from Saul. He took the kingdom away from him. And God raised up David, a man after his own heart.²⁹ Saul was not a man after God’s heart. Saul was not a converted person.

This may be hard for us to reckon with. Saul was not a converted person. But yet the Spirit of God came upon him and he prophesied. Think about this, folks.

There is a lesson right here. Jesus was very clear about identifying his disciples. “You shall know them by their fruits.”³⁰ Right? “You shall know them by their fruits.”³¹

Someone is not identified as a disciple because of his or her gifts. You can prophecy and speak in tongues. You can speak in the language of men and of angels, and if you do not have love you are nothing.³² “You shall know them by their fruits.”³³ Gifts don’t prove a thing. I can stand up here and preach. And you can say, “He has a good gift.” But does that prove that I am a disciple? No. “You shall know them by their fruits.”³⁴

Again, as Jesus taught, it is quite possible for unconverted people to manifest joy in their lives and what we perceive with our physical eyes to be that which identifies them as converted people. Yet they are not born again. “This is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself.”³⁵

Please go back to Matthew 12 with me, verses 31 and 32.

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.³⁶

Putting our texts together, this is what we have. The unpardonable sin is a sin committed by an individual in the belly of the visible church who may, indeed, have received light from God. But this individual walks away from the visible Church declaring what is taking place there is not the Spirit of God, but the spirit of the devil. In the unpardonable

²⁸ See 1 Samuel 15:22.

²⁹ See 1 13:13-14.

³⁰ Matthew 7:16.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See 1 Corinthians 13:1.

³³ Matthew 7:16.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Matthew 13:20-21.

³⁶ Matthew 12:31-32.

sin, a person who is within the visible church walks away from the church and blasphemes by calling the work of the Spirit within the visible body the work of Satan.

I have heard Dr. John Gerstner talk about this saying, “I have never seen anyone commit this sin and I hope I never do.”

I have never seen anyone commit this sin either and I hope I never do. I have seen people walk away from the Church. They walk away but not with the indictment against the Church that the Spirit at work in her midst is demonic. I have never seen this particular sin. I hope I never do see it.

There is only one identifiable, unforgivable sin, only one. And every other conceivable sin you may commit is forgivable. Yes, *every* other conceivable sin is pardonable. Look at Matthew chapter 12 again verses 31 and 32. “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people.”³⁷

Any sin, you name it: adultery, blasphemy against the Father, blasphemy against the Son, theft, murder. You name the sin. Any sin is forgivable. Sexual sins committed in youth are forgivable, blotted out by God. Every other conceivable sin is forgivable. Praise God that this is the case.

Only one, only one sin is unforgivable. And why does Jesus point this out? It seems to me the reason—at least in part—he points this out, is to warn us. But the fact that there is only one unpardonable sin also enjoins us to look, look, look at the grace of God. Look at the mercy of God. Every other sin is forgivable. And when you can identify the one and only sin that is not forgivable you can say, “Praise God for his grace. How good you are, Lord. Yes, I have sinned against my parents. Yes, I have embezzled funds at the office. Yes, I have had hateful thoughts in my heart with regard to my neighbor. And if I had a chance, if I had a chance...” Well, I had better not say it. Every sin is forgivable. Thank you, Lord, that this is the case.

And so, my friend, I call him my friend, wrote me the email in his distress because he thought, erroneously, that he had committed the unpardonable sin. I encouraged this man to read one more verse in his Bible, just one more verse, to see that turning from your evil ways and turning back to God brings forgiveness.³⁸

And so I say to you, friends, once again, God is good. Yes, God is extremely good. All the sins that you commit and that I commit can be forgiven. So don't be fooled; there is only one identifiable and unpardonable sin, only one, and every other sin you may commit is forgivable.

Let's pray together.

³⁷ Matthew 12:31.

³⁸ See Ezekiel 18:21.

Father, this is difficult material from your Word. We pray that as we wrestle with your Word, as we wrestle with you through your Word, that we will be like Jacob of old and not turn loose until you bless us. Grant that your people here might wrestle with you through your Word. May they be like Jacob of old and not turn loose, wrestling with you through your Word, until you bless them. Be pleased to bless your people through this your Word so that they are not fooled. Grant that they may understand there is only one unpardonable sin, that it is identifiable, and that every other sin—thank you, Lord—every other sin we may commit is forgivable. Thank you that all of this is the case and bless us in your grace we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.