

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 30, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN**

Mark 3:20-30

An unforgivable sin. *The* unforgivable or unpardonable sin. This is, without a doubt, one of the hardest, most troubling, and most often misunderstood sayings of Jesus.

There are three places in the Gospels where Jesus speaks about this unforgivable sin: here in Mark 3:28-29; in Matthew 12:31-32; and in Luke 12:10.

In Matthew 12 and Mark 3, the chronologies are very similar. In both Gospels, it follows the Sabbath controversies in which, with Jesus' approval, His disciples picked grain and ate it while walking through a wheat field on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28), and then, at a synagogue, Jesus healed a man with a crippled hand (Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6). As we saw two weeks ago, the critics of Jesus objected in both cases because, as they saw it, these activities constituted work that should not be done on the Sabbath day. Matthew and Mark both then tell of Jesus' growing popularity, with large crowds following Him wherever He went (Matthew 12:15-21; Mark 3:7-12). Mark follows this with an account of Jesus going up a mountain and selecting the 12 disciples to be His apostles (Mark 3:13-19).

Mark says that after coming down from the mountain, Jesus went into an unidentified house, followed by such a large and needy crowd that Jesus and His disciples didn't even have time to eat (Mark 3:20). Matthew says that a demon-oppressed man who was both blind and mute was brought to Jesus, and He healed him, so the man could both talk and see (Matthew 12:22). This gave rise to the charge of the religion experts that Jesus was operating in league with the devil himself. They said: "It is by the power of Beelzebul (or Beelzebub), the prince of demons, that Jesus drives out demons" (Matthew 12:24; cf. Mark 3:22).

Beelzebul was the name of an ancient Canaanite deity. The name originally meant "Lord of the high places." Among the Jews it came to mean "Lord of the flies," "Lord of the filth," or "Lord of the abyss." Instead of the high places, they saw Beelzebul as the ruler of the lowest places of all – in other words, the dwelling place of demons. And chief among the demons, of course, is Satan himself. So, the religious leaders of the Jews were accusing Jesus of being an agent or tool of Satan. They charged Him with collusion: collusion with the devil. Their accusation against Jesus is what gave rise to Jesus' warning about the unforgivable sin.

The setting in Luke's Gospel is different. That should not disturb us, since it is likely that Jesus spoke about the unforgivable sin on more than one occasion. In Luke 12, Jesus is speaking to a huge crowd, a crowd of thousands who had come to hear Him with their own ears and, I imagine, to see what He could do with their own eyes. Can you imagine what that must have been like? After warning the crowd against the yeast – the phony, shallow

religiousness – of the Pharisees with all their rules and regulations, Jesus again speaks in verse 10 of the unforgivable sin.

So, what exactly is this unforgivable sin? In all three places – Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; and Luke 12:10 – Jesus refers to this sin that is so serious it will never be forgiven as “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 12:31-32: “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven ... either in this age or in the age to come.”

Mark 3:28-29: “All the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Luke 12:10: “Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”

There you have it. The person who is guilty of the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will *never* be forgiven. Which begs the question: What exactly *is* this unforgivable sin?

In a theological context, blasphemy refers to slanderous, derogatory, contemptuous, or abusive speech directed toward God. It is “an expression of defiant hostility toward God” (William Lane, *Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament). Another way to say it, according to Chuck Swindoll, is “defiant irreverence” (Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights: Mark*, 100). To “misuse the name of the Lord your God,” to “take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” as is prohibited by #3 in the list of the Ten Commandments God gave His people, sometimes rises to the level of blasphemy. Perhaps “sinks” is more accurate and appropriate than “rises.”

Jesus has something specific in mind here. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, this sin for which there is no forgiveness, does not refer to some kind of momentary spiritual lapse. It does not involve the uttering of a few thoughtless words or expletives. (Which is not to say that expletives are acceptable for followers of Jesus, or that careless words are no big deal. They are! Words are powerful and have consequences for good or ill.) But blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not defined by a momentary spiritual lapse or an angry outburst or the use of words or expressions that are unbecoming of followers of Jesus.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit involves a willful, defiant, hardened rejection of the truth of the gospel and of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The primary mission of the Holy Spirit, as we say in the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith*, is “to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts.” To commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is to willfully and knowingly shut your eyes to the truth of the gospel; to deliberately reject the witness of the Holy Spirit regarding Jesus; and to stubbornly attribute the works of Jesus, including His healings and other acts of mercy, all of which were done in the power of the Holy Spirit, to Satan. That is the essence of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

If you believe what God is doing in the world today is really the work of Satan; if you see miracles of grace and believe Satan is behind them; if you think, as some people do, that God is *not* good and that Jesus, far from being the world's Savior, is responsible for everything that is wrong with the world, or in the world; then you are in danger of committing this sin for which there is no forgiveness. I am confident – beyond a reasonable doubt – that none of you fits this description. But only you and God know for sure.

Jesus is talking about a heart condition for which there is no cure. He is talking about a heart so hardened by unbelief and opposition to the gospel that it is beyond repair, beyond hope of repentance, beyond hope of a change of heart. The reason such a person is beyond hope, the reason they are guilty of a sin that will never be forgiven, is because they will never turn to God in true repentance. They will never acknowledge their need of Jesus. They will never turn from their self-chosen way, from their opposition and hostility to Jesus. If they did, they would find grace and forgiveness at the foot of the cross. But if they have crossed this line, if they are so hardened against the gospel and the saving power of Jesus that they will never turn to Him, they will never be forgiven. *Never*. That is why this is an unforgivable sin.

Charles Swindoll says this about it: “If this blasphemy is ever acknowledged as sin, it can be forgiven (Mark 3:28). Sin becomes unpardonable when the guilty one rejects the path that leads to pardon, continues in rebellion, and refuses to bow in submission before God. Therefore, a person receiving the penalty of the ‘unpardonable sin’ has condemned himself” (or herself). “This sin is a chronically rebellious and continuing attitude, not a single act” (Swindoll, 100-101).

Another preacher/scholar, Daniel Akin, points out that “This unpardonable sin is characterized by consistently rejecting the obvious and logical conclusion that [the works of Jesus] are done by the Spirit of God. It is a persistent rejection of and declaration against what the Spirit of God is doing in and through Jesus.” With hardened hearts, he says, the Pharisees “look(ed) at the supremely good One” – Jesus – “and call(ed) Him the supremely evil one” (Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 77).

To quote one more New Testament commentator, William Barclay says this: “The scribes and Pharisees had been able to look at the incarnate love of God” [Jesus] “and to think it the incarnate power of Satan” (William Barclay, *Mark*). I don't usually like to quote Barclay because, despite the occasional depth of his insights, his view of the person and work of Christ is dangerously deficient. I do not recommend that you use Barclay's Commentaries in your Bible study or look to him as a reliable biblical interpreter. I'm sorry to say that his writings make it clear that he did not believe in the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice that Jesus does not directly or definitively say that the Pharisees, with their charge that Jesus is not the Son of God but actually an agent of the devil, have already committed the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. He does make it clear, though, that they are at least in the danger zone (G. Campbell Morgan, *Mark*, 82, 83). They may not have crossed the line of no return yet, but they were close.

The “woes” the Lord spoke against His people in Isaiah 5 clearly applied to the Pharisees, as they do to many people today, both religious and irreligious alike. This is from Isaiah 5:20-21:

“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
and clever in their own sight.”

You don’t have to look very hard to see this going on today, sometimes by people who claim to be followers of Jesus or even to speak for God and to know His will. Whether it involves the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which is the ultimate in calling good evil, is for God to judge, not us. I pray that these woes will never apply to us – that we will never call what is good evil or what is evil good, that we will never think we are wise in our own eyes or that we have all the answers to everything. We don’t. God does. But we don’t.

Have you ever wondered – or worried – if perhaps you were guilty of this unforgivable sin? If, at some point in your life, you have committed the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? I think this is a fairly common fear among believers, especially among Christians with a particularly tender conscience toward God. When I was much younger, I wondered about it. I wondered if I had somehow committed this sin. If you wonder or have ever worried about whether you are guilty of it, I want to assure you that the fact that you are concerned about it is convincing evidence that you have *not* committed it. If you were guilty of it, you wouldn’t care. It wouldn’t bother you a bit. If you do care, if you want to live in such a way that you never cut yourself off from God’s forgiveness, you can be sure that you have not committed the unforgivable sin. Take heart, and rejoice in the forgiveness God offers for all our sins.

The message of forgiveness is easy to miss, with the heaviness of what Jesus says about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but there is a note of amazing grace in Jesus’ response to the accusation made against Him by the Pharisees. More than a note, it is more like a melody of grace. Listen to this: In Mark 3:28, Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.” Yes, there is one sin that will not be forgiven. But think about how many sins *can* be forgiven. Think about how many sins *will* be forgiven. Think about the wideness of God’s mercy. Think about the reach of God’s grace.

How many of our sins will God forgive? How many of your sins and mine has He made provision for in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross? The answer is *all* of them (3:28). The blood of Jesus covers *every* sin you can ever commit. There is only this one exception, and no genuine follower of Jesus – no one who is truly repentant and truly trusts in Jesus for salvation – will ever be guilty of the unforgivable sin. This, as the apostle Paul liked to say, is a trustworthy saying.

You may wonder: Is it really true that God can and will forgive *all* my sins? You may believe He is a forgiving God, but still wonder if He can forgive all the things you have done.

What if you hit and kill someone while you're driving under the influence? Can God forgive that? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What if you have an abortion? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about cheating on your husband or wife? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about cheating on a test in school? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about spreading vicious rumors or destroying someone's reputation? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about experimenting with homosexuality? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about loving money, or comfort, or pleasure, or *anything* more than God? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about treating people differently – *mistreating* them – on the basis of the color of their skin, their accent, or national origin? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

What about the worst thing you can possibly imagine? Or the worst thing you've ever done, the thing Satan keeps throwing in your face to try to torment you and rob you of the freedom and joy of being forgiven? *Every sin will be forgiven.*

(Adapted from Douglas S. O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 334.)

Every sin will be forgiven. This does not mean that sin – your sin and mine – is not a serious matter. Sin is a very serious matter. It has serious consequences. Sometimes the consequences of a particular sin will have ripple effects for generations. All sin, not just the unforgivable sin, is serious.

But here is the thing: There is more grace in the heart of God than there is sin in your life – past, present, or future. No matter what kind of mess(es) you have made in your life, “The forgiveness of God forgives the mess” (Jill Briscoe, “The Forgiveness of God,” www.preachingtoday.com). There is no mess you can make *in* your life or *of* your life that God cannot forgive. His forgiveness is available to anyone and everyone who will come to Him with repentance and trusting faith in the saving work of Jesus.

God's forgiveness is not automatic. It is not universal. It is not given indiscriminately to everyone. But it is universally available. It is a gift of mercy and grace. It comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. It comes to anyone and everyone who will receive it through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Are *you* forgiven? Have you asked Jesus to forgive *your* sins? *All* of them? *He is able.* More than able. And willing.

Don't wait another day. Don't wait another minute. Receive His forgiveness today. Right now. Lay your sins at the foot of His cross. Let Him set your heart free. There is no sin too big (or too small). Jesus can handle it all.

In one sense, the unforgivable sin is denying that you need forgiveness, and refusing to turn to God in humility and faith to receive the forgiveness you need.

One last thought, and I'm done. J.C. Ryle, a 19th-century English evangelical pastor and author who was the first Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, wrote in his book *Foundations of Faith*: "Forgiven souls are humble. They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them (humble). They are brands plucked from the fire – debtors who could not pay for themselves – captives who (would) have remained in prison forever, but for undeserved mercy – wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them; and what right then have they" [have *we*?] "to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say – they are of all God's creatures the most inconsistent, and of all God's children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows."

God's forgiveness should never make us proud. It should ever make us humble And grateful. And forgiving of others.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.