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What is the Unforgivable Sin?

By Tal Davis

Sometimes we hear people say when confronted with the Gospel, "But you don't know how bad my life has been. I don't think God could possibly forgive me of my sins." They have the idea that because they may have committed some pretty awful sins, they are beyond the scope of God's redemption. Many non-Christian religions and even some Christian denominations actually teach that if a person commits certain kinds of sins they will certainly go to hell or someplace like it. A few churches argue that behaviors like smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol, gambling, fornication, adultery, stealing, lying, and murder will surely get a person excluded from heaven. Some might say something as trivial as a woman cutting her hair would put her in danger of going to hell.

In this article we are going to explore the question, "What is the unforgivable sin?" Or, to put another way, "Is there a sin or are there sins that are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness? And, if so, what is it or what are they?"

Normally we would say that the Bible makes it clear that even the worst of sinners are not beyond the forgiving love of God's grace. The salvation delivered to mankind by Christ's death and resurrection covers any level of sinful activity we can have performed in this life. Isn't that correct?

This is illustrated well in the Bible. All we have to do is look at some of the great men in the Scriptures to see how God used them in spite of their sinful actions.

Joseph forgave his brothers who had sold him into slavery which he said God had used for good. Miraculously, he had become a ruler in Egypt so he could save his people from famine.

Moses murdered an Egyptian overseer who was mistreating some Israelites. He then fled into the desert where he tended sheep for forty years. In spite of his sin, the LORD God eventually confronted Moses and called him to go back to Egypt to lead his people out of bondage. Reluctantly Moses obeyed the LORD and for forty more years led the people of Israel through the wilderness to the promised land.

King David, "a man after God's own heart," committed the sin of adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of his top field general, Uriah the Hittite. When she was found to be pregnant, David then tried to cover it up by sending Uriah to the front line of the battle so he would be killed. Then he could take Bathsheba as his wife. His sin was exposed by the prophet Nathan. David then solemnly repented of his sin as detailed in Psalm 51. There David expresses both his guilt and his relief for God's forgiveness.

*Create in me a clean heart, God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence,
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:10-11)*

And let's not forget the great men of the New Testament. Though they eventually did amazing acts of service for the Lord Jesus, they did not necessarily start out that way.

Simon Peter was a crusty fisherman who Jesus called to be one of His disciples. Simon was dismissive at first being unsure he could live up to Jesus' expectations. Anyway, at a critical point in his relationship with Jesus, Peter denied knowing Him three times. As they took Jesus away to be tried, Peter took the sinful coward's way out. Nonetheless, after His resurrection, on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (Sea of Galilee), Jesus took Simon Peter aside and three times asked him, "*Do you love me?*" Three times Peter responded, "*You know that I love you.*" Finally Jesus told him, "*Feed my sheep*" and restored Peter to his place as an Apostle. But, as John makes clear, Jesus also told Peter it would come with a price.

"Truly, truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to put on your belt and walk wherever you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will put your belt on you, and bring you where you do not want to go." Now He said this, indicating by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had said this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" (John 21:18-19 NASB)

And how can we forget Saul (Paul) who confessed this about himself, *This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full accep-*

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tance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" and I am the worst of them. (1 Timothy 1:15 CSB)

Yes, Saul was as a terrible sinner. He had been present at the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7:54-60. Luke, the author of Acts, makes a couple of poignant statements in this account. First he says, *When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him (Stephen); and the witnesses laid aside their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul.* (Acts 7:58 NASB) Then, in Acts 8:1, Luke makes this startling note, *Now Saul approved of putting Stephen to death.* (NASB)

From there, Saul became a zealous persecutor of the early church. He went here and there carrying warrants from the Sanhedrin for the arrests of church leaders. That ended, of course, when he was on the road to Damascus and was confronted by the risen Jesus (Acts 9). The Lord Himself told Ananias that, despite Saul's dreadful past, He had chosen him to be His instrument to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. (Acts 9:15-16)

One other New Testament character deserves mention. That person is James, the son of Joseph and Mary and the half-brother of Jesus Himself. We are told that James and his other brothers and sisters had rejected Jesus' claim to Messiahship during His earthly ministry. (John 7:5) However, Paul says that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). He eventually became a major figure and leader in the Jerusalem church. Paul even went to Jerusalem to confer with him and Peter. (Acts 9:28; 1 Cor. 15:3-5; Gal. 1:18-19)

So we can see that even the worst of sinners are not beyond the saving grace of God. Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross paid the price for all our sins. All that is necessary is that we repent of our sins and accept by faith the grace He offers as a free gift. In this sense there is no unforgivable sin. As we see by the examples above, nothing we can do is unforgivable.

But wait a minute! There is problem! In Matthew 12, Jesus makes this alarming statement:

"Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And 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." (Matthew 12:31-32 NASB)

When we read Jesus' statement we immediately ask, "Just exactly what does He mean by "blasphemy against the Spirit?" And, "How can I be sure I am not committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? I certainly don't want to be guilty of committing the unpardonable sin."

To start with, to define the unforgivable or unpardonable sin, we need to define what it is not. It is not, as we have seen by the examples above, sins like murder, lying, stealing, suicide, adultery, taking the Lord's name in vain, a sin committed in ignorance, or any sin that a Christian can or has committed (so relax). What could worse than those? So what else can it be?

The unpardonable sin, according to Jesus, is to commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To understand what that means we need to define the term "blasphemy." The Greek word translated blasphemy is *blasphémia* which is defined as evil speaking, railing, vilification, and slander.

The noun *blasphémia* (Strong's 988) gathers every form of speech that reviles the character, reputation, or majesty of God and, by extension, defames or slanders fellow image-bearers. Ranging from careless insults to conscious repudiation of divine truth, it appears eighteen times in the Greek New Testament and functions as a moral and theological marker that separates holiness from profanity. (Bible Hub Topical Lexicon: <https://biblehub.com/greek/988.htm>)

So Jesus is saying, in essence, the unforgivable sin is to speak evil, to rail, to vilify, or to slander the Holy Spirit. So how does that work out in what Jesus says in the context of Matthew 12? To understand Jesus meaning we need to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus Himself. Everything Jesus was and did from His conception forward (Luke 1:35) was empowered by the Holy Spirit as affirmed at His baptism (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). Luke says that after His baptism Jesus was "*full of the Holy Spirit*" (Luke 4:1) who then led Him into the wilderness to face the temptations of Satan. (Mark 1:12)

After overcoming Satan's temptations by the power of the Spirit, Jesus went back to Galilee. There He taught in the synagogues (Luke 4:14) and began a ministry

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of healing and miracles. Most dramatic among them was casting out demons. Matthew records one instance when Jesus healed a demon-possessed blind and mute man. The miracle astonished the people who began to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah. (Matt. 12:22-23) However, the skeptical Pharisees declared that the miracle was actually the work of Satan, "*This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.*" (Matt. 12:24 NASB) Jesus refuted their allegation by a logical deduction.

And knowing their thoughts, Jesus said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan is casting out Satan, he has become divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? And if by Beelzebul I cast out the demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges." (Matthew 12:25-27 NASB)

Then in verses 31 and 32 He makes His strong warning about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.

"Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And 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." (Matthew 12: 31-32 NASB)

The context makes it clear that Jesus credited His miraculous works of healing and exorcisms to the power of the Holy Spirit. He even says that someone can commit blasphemy against Him, the Son of Man, and yet be forgiven. However, He says that anyone who commits blasphemy against the power of the Holy Spirit by attributing His works to Satan, as did the hard-hearted Pharisees, cannot be forgiven.

The Pharisees had seen what Jesus had done as eye-witnesses of God's Spirit's mighty work through Him. Yet they stubbornly rejected Him as the Messiah. By doing so they committed blasphemy, not against Him, but against the Spirit who worked through Him and testified to Him in their hearts. That was unforgivable.

Even in our present era, people are convicted by the Holy Spirit of their sin and need for repentance for salvation in Christ. Nonetheless, they may just as obstinately resist the Spirit's nudging as did the Pharisees of Jesus' time. Did you ever had a chance to attend a Billy Graham evangelistic service? If so, you may have seen, when the invitation was given, some people literally grab hold of their seats to resist the urge of the Spirit to go forward to respond. That's a modern version of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And, if one keeps up the resistance, then, when life comes to an end, there will be no more chances for forgiveness. That will be the unforgivable sin.

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