

# The Unforgivable Sin

Last week we began to look at Mark 3: 20-35. Right in the middle of this passage Jesus talks about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, something that He calls the unforgivable sin. If you have ever wondered what exactly is the unforgivable sin, we will talk about that in today's message. Listen to the scripture:

## Mark 3:28-30

**28 "Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter;**

**29 but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation"--**

**30 because they said, "He has an unclean spirit."**

We're going to spend a wee bit of time on this, because many explanations have been offered as to what the unpardonable sin is. Many people in our world who are not Christians think they have committed it. Even some who profess to be Christians fear that they may commit this sin.

It is certainly a scary subject. What could be more terrifying than to believe you are beyond forgiveness and bound for eternal misery with no escape?

Today I want us to ask three questions of the scripture:

Is there really an unforgivable sin?

If so, what is it?

How should we live in view of it?

## 1. Is There Really an Unforgivable Sin?

Is there really an unforgivable sin? Note verse 29, "**but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation.**"

Let me make two quick observations as we consider this question:

First, the **Jesus is talking about God's forgiveness**. The sweetest news for a sinner is that God has forgiven him, that God no longer holds his sins against him. But the worst news in the world is that God will never forgive you. God is the one to reckon with. What men think about our sin is relatively unimportant. What God thinks is infinitely important.

The good news is that all kinds of sins and blasphemies can be forgiven. That is really good news. It means that no matter how badly you have sinned against God, God can still forgive you. Even the sin of blasphemy can be forgiven. Blasphemy means deliberately mocking or profaning God, so that's pretty bad sin. All types of sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. The Bible says that even blasphemy against Jesus can be forgiven!

Second, **Never Really Means Never**. Jesus says that God will never forgive a person who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit. When a human says, "I'll never forgive you," we may go on with life. There are others we can turn to; and "never" really doesn't mean never. But when God says, "I will never forgive you," then there is nobody to turn to in all the universe and never really means never. If God

says to you, "Never will I forgive you," then a million ages from now His verdict will be like granite.

The same episode in Matthew 12 makes Jesus' meaning more precise, "**Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.**" (Matthew 12:31-32). It is an eternally unforgivable sin.

God is never neutral to sin. He either forgives it or punishes it. There is no neutral middle ground of indifference. Not to be forgiven by God forever, is to suffer his wrath forever.

So in answer to the first question, yes, there is an unforgivable sin. Jesus calls it an eternal sin, one that never has forgiveness, one that sends a person into eternity to bear his guilt under God's wrath forever.

## **2. What Is This Unforgivable Sin?**

The second question: What is this sin that is beyond forgiveness? Again verse 29: **"but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation."** The unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But what is that?

The Context in Mark

Well, like every interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, context is key - don't just pluck a verse out of context and give it your own meaning, you've got to root it and ground it in the passage where you find it. Verse 30 makes clear that Mark wants us to understand blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in relation to the scene in verses 20–27. Verse 30 gives the reason why Jesus brought up the issue of an unforgivable sin: **"because they said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'"** That points us back to verse 22: **"And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebub,' and, 'By the ruler of the demons He casts out demons.'"** Now Jesus does not say that these scribes have committed the unforgivable sin. He hears them attribute His power over demons to Satan instead of to the Holy Spirit and He says, **"Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness."** It is a warning to the scribes. Maybe they have committed the unforgivable sin, maybe they haven't. But when they see the work of the Holy Spirit and call it the work of Satan, they are at least on the brink of never-ending guilt. Perhaps they have even fallen over the edge.

Why do I hesitate to equate what the scribes said with unforgivable blasphemy? I hesitate because Jesus invites me to with verse 28. **"Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter."** The key to understanding the unforgivable sin is how verse 28 can be stated so absolutely (**"all sins and blasphemies will be forgiven"**) and yet verse 29 can say that there is a blasphemy and a sin beyond forgiveness.

What does verse 28 mean? Mark has made it plain already in his Gospel that sins are forgiven only if a person repents. Mark 1:4, **"John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."** Mark 1:14, 15, **"Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom is at hand, repent and believe**

**in the gospel."** In order for anyone to receive forgiveness of sins, they have to repent—that is, to turn from sin to God and trust His grace and follow him. So when Jesus says in Mark 3:28, **"All sins will be forgiven the sons of men and whatever blasphemies they utter,"** he means, all sins and blasphemies from which you genuinely repent.

Why, then, in verse 29 does Jesus seem to exclude one sin and one blasphemy from this promise: the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? I think the reason is that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit puts you beyond repentance, and therefore beyond forgiveness. Verse 29 is not an exception to verse 28. Jesus is not saying, All blasphemies that you repent of will be forgiven except blasphemy against the Spirit. He is saying, all blasphemies that you repent of will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven because it puts you beyond repentance—you won't be able to repent of it. If a sin makes it impossible for you to repent, then that is an unforgivable sin, because forgiveness is promised only to those sins from which we genuinely repent (cf. 4:12).

#### Why This Particular Sin Makes Repentance Impossible

Well, if you take the wider context and you look at Matthew 12, where this verse is found also, we see that these words were spoken by Jesus after He had healed the demon possessed man. The crowd, the ordinary people, were saying **"Could this be the Son of David?"** They were testifying His true identity, they were responding to God's ministry of the Holy Spirit in their midst, and yet the Scribes and Pharisees responded by taking an opportunity to say: **This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.** The ordinary everyday people recognized that this was Jesus the Messiah, sent by the Spirit - but the Scribes refused and hardened their hearts, and attributed His ministry to the devil.

Think about the broader context in the history of Israel. God the Father sent John the Baptist to preparing the nation for the coming Messiah, prepare the way of the Lord. Many people responded to John's call and repented, in Matthew 21:32 Jesus says: **"For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."** The religious leaders would not permit their hearts to recognize the Spirit at work in John the Baptist or in the Lord Jesus.

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and demonstrated God's power in many convicting ways - how did those religious leaders respond? By arresting the apostles, ordering them not to speak in the name of the Lord Jesus, then killing Stephen themselves - and Stephen told them their sin, what was their sin? Acts 7:51: **'You do always resist the Holy Spirit'**. They were sinning against the Holy Spirit in that manner. There could be no forgiveness because they forever rejected the witness of the Spirit about Christ.

So this sin against the Holy Spirit, this unpardonable sin seems to mean a deliberate forever closing of the heart and mind to the witness of the Spirit to Jesus - that's what the Scribes were in danger of doing.

But why does this one particular sin, this one blasphemy, make it impossible to repent and be forgiven? It is the unique and special role of the Holy Spirit to

apply the Father's plan of salvation and the Son's atonement to our hearts. It is the Spirit's work to open our eyes, to grant repentance, and to bring us to faith. Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit in John 16:8-11:

**And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.**

To commit this sin is to shut ourselves off from the only one who could ever bring us to repentance. And so we shut ourselves off from forgiveness.

Listen to me this morning: if you are a Christian or a non-Christian, and you fear that you have ever committed the unpardonable sin, that is sure proof that you have never committed it - because anyone who has committed it is past feeling, past caring; they have outright rejected the gospel completely and permanently. Only God knows when a person has done hardened their heart that much -- but ultimately this is a complete and utter rejection of the ministry of the Holy Spirit that will take people to hell.

### **3. How Shall We Live in Light of This Possibility?**

Our final question is: How should we live in view of this possibility?

Run from Sin with Fear and Trembling

The fact that there is an unforgivable sin should drive us from sin with fear and trembling. None of us knows when our toying with sin will pass over into irrevocable hardness of heart. Very few people feel how serious sin is. Very few people are on the same wavelength with Jesus when he said in Mark 9:43, **"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched."** Many people have the naïve notion that God's patience has no end and that they can always return from any length and depth of sin, forgetting that there is a point of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so grievously that He may withdraw forever with His convicting power, leaving them never able to repent and be forgiven.

They are like the buzzard who spots a carcass on a piece of ice floating in the river. He lands and begins to eat. He knows it is dangerous because the falls are just ahead. But he looks at his wings and says to himself, "I can fly to safety in an instant." And he goes on eating. Just before the ice goes over the falls he spreads his wings to fly but his claws are frozen in the ice and there is no escape—neither in this age nor the age to come.

You have heard the warning. Now hear the offer of grace. **"All sins will be forgiven the sons of men and whatever blasphemies they utter."** I urge you in the name of Christ: if by God's grace you can repent today of your sin, do it now, because you may not be able to tomorrow.

Where do you stand with God today? Where do you stand with Jesus Christ? Jesus said, "You are either with me or against me." (Matthew 12:30) And so you need to decide. Not deciding is deciding. You either choose to stand with Christ, or you have decided against him.