

## The Unforgiveable Sin

Matt. 12:22-32

**Intro.** One of the most wonderful emphases in the Bible and Christianity is the willingness of God to forgive our sin. God is not only willing to forgive, but He is eager to do so. Are you thankful for that? When the Lord passed in front of Moses, He said, "**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.**" – Ex. 34:6, 7

And God doesn't forgive with reluctance. He doesn't forgive as we do. We say...*"I forgive but you'd better watch out if this ever happens again!"* The Psalmist wrote in **Psa. 86:5 - You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.** The prophet Micah also praised the holiness of Israel's God. He said, **Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. - Micah 7:18, 19**

When Jesus, came...His people should have recognized Him simply because of His willingness to forgive sinners. The gods of paganism are vengeful and merciless. Forgiveness is not part of their persona or repertoire. As the prophet Micah declared, the true and living God stands alone in His willingness to pardon and forgive sin. The essence of the Gospel we embrace is God's divine and gracious provision which makes possible the forgiveness of our sin.

Here are a few Bible based facts about God's forgiveness:

- No matter how heinous the crime, God can forgive it. The worst mankind could ever do was done to the Son of God on Calvary's cross. But what did Jesus pray from that cross? He prayed, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**" - **Lk. 23:34** **Forgive them...** Respond to them as though this never happened! Humanity has committed unspeakable crimes, but nothing tops the injustice of Christ crucified. No sin could be more offensive to God. But even this sin was not outside the scope of God's forgiveness.
- But what about the amount of sin? Surely there's a tipping point when the sheer volume of sins committed outweighs God's willingness to forgive. Not so! The thief on the cross was a common criminal whose rap sheet may have looked like a \$500 register tape from Kroger. His life patterns were rooted in sinful thoughts and behaviors. But when this criminal expressed the tiniest shred of faith in Christ, like an opened spillway, mercy and grace rushed forth to save and forgive him. Jesus said, "**I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.**" - **Lk. 23:43** So the volume of sin is no obstacle to God's forgiveness. God is just as willing to forgive a lifelong criminal as a young child!
- But someone may object and say, "*There must be sin God refuses to forgive!*" *Do you mean to say God can forgive a serial killer or a child-molester? What about the terrorist who brutally murders innocents.*" Can God forgive them? Yes, He can! The Bible contains declarations and examples of God extending mercy and forgiveness for sins of idolatry / murder / gluttony / fornication / adultery / cheating / lying / homosexuality / covenant breaking / blasphemy / drunkenness / extortion / and every other sin imaginable. In **I Cor. 6:9-11** - Paul listed sins the Corinthians were guilty of before they trusted Christ. **Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 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** (past tense). **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.** Though the Corinthians were “real people,” God forgave them completely. The punishment their sin deserved was transferred to Jesus who died to wash, sanctify and justify them. In God’s sight they were forever clean and forgiven.

So God’s ability and willingness to forgive isn’t limited by seriousness / amount / or type of sin. As **Rom. 5:20** declares...**where sin increased, grace increased all the more.** This means God’s grace to forgive is greater than sin is to condemn. Yet there can be no forgiveness for even the smallest sin until God is approached in honesty, humility and childlike faith. In **v. 31** of our text this AM Jesus said, **“...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men...”** The preposition **every** doesn’t mean *some, most or almost every...* **Every** means *every one!* But the forgiveness God offers isn’t like the life insurance policy my bank says is mine just because I bank there. God’s forgiveness must be received through personal faith in Jesus Christ. To reject Jesus, is to forfeit God’s salvation and reject the forgiveness He is eager to provide.

This AM we see Israel at the crossroads every person must come to. In the setting of these verses, Jesus again demonstrated His authority over the spirit world and the physical realm. As the crowd witnessed yet another miracle of deliverance and healing, opinions were being formed and decisions made about Jesus and who He is. The Pharisees had already made up their minds that Jesus was not their Messiah. They saw Him as an imposter and a threat to the status quo. After Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand, **12:14** says **...the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.** Even though they recognized His miracles were greater than anything they could do, the Pharisees told the people it was done in the power of the Devil. By their unbelief and blasphemy, they committed the one sin God cannot forgive. We need to carefully examine this sin in its context because *“the unpardonable sin”* is the source of much confusion and alarm. On the surface, it seems to be out of harmony with God’s eagerness to forgive.

**1. The authority of Jesus - v. 22 - Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.**

I love the simplicity of Christ’s healings. Without staging or fanfare **v. 22** says, **and Jesus healed him.** One moment the man was possessed by an evil spirit who robbed him of sight and speech. The next moment He was delivered and healed. The man was utterly helpless. He had to be brought to Jesus because he was **blind**. He couldn’t express desires or faith (if he had any), because he was **mute**. Here was a man who spent his days in darkness and silence until Jesus came. Like the man with the withered hand, he was a picture of Israel. Under Satan’s influence the nation was blind to the glory of God in the face of Christ. Their lips were sealed from offering Him praise. And once again, Jesus challenged their unbelief by demonstrating irresistible power and authority. At His command the demon left. The man’s eyesight and ability to speak was immediately restored. By fulfilling Scripture, these miracles proved Jesus is the Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven had come near. What Jesus did for this man He can do for anyone and the nation if they would only receive Him. Notice the response of those who witnessed this miracle.

**2. The astonishment of the people - v. 23 - All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"**

The Jewish people expected their Messiah to be a **Son of** (or descendent) of King **David**. The genealogy of **chap.1** clearly chronicles His descent from Abraham and then from David through Solomon. **Son of David** was the title the crowds ascribed to Jesus on Palm Sunday. (**Matt. 21:9**) Despite the amazement His miracles generated, the crowd remained skeptical and unbelieving.

Their question anticipates a negative response. The emphasis is on the word **this**. It was like the response of the woman given a weed whacker on Mother's Day. She looks at her husband and says, "Is this what you got me?"...emphasis on "this." So their response implied...*"No, this man can't be the one! Where are His royal robes and military might? Where are His horses, chariots, and mighty army? This man with his fishermen buddies is just a carpenter. Instead of greatness, we see gentleness and humility. Where's the power in that? Could this be the Son of David?...we don't think so!"*

The Pharisees seized on this moment of doubting and indecision. Satan is often most effective when emotions run high, faith is weak and we're not thinking biblically. Like the seed that fell on the hard path in the parable of the sower...the Pharisees tried to snatch up any seeds of truth before they had a chance to take root. With venomous hostility, they leveled their most serious accusation at Jesus. Spewing from evil hearts, they committed the one sin God cannot pardon or forgive.

### **3. The Accusation of the Pharisees - v. 24 - But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."**

The word translated **astonished** in v.23 is the Greek word *existemi*. Other Greek words express reactions less intense than this. But *existemi* expresses extreme amazement. It means the people were *dumbfounded* or *thunderstruck*. A skate boarder or somebody cool like Ryan Slocum, might put it this way...*"Dude, we were totally blown away!"* The energy in their response was alarming to the Pharisees. It immediately drew their attention.

Last Friday night a Tiger's game was on the television in the restaurant where Peggy and I had supper. At one point, the drone of conversation was interrupted by loud cheers from patrons watching the game. I'm not sure what happened. But judging from the response of these Tiger fans, it must have been outstanding...a grand slam or something.

That was the situation. The crowd's astonishment was **heard** and felt by the Pharisees which caused them to shift into defense mode. *"We can't allow this! This sort of enthusiasm is infectious and dangerous. It could lead to a demonstration that upsets the peace and irritates the Romans!"* Faster than a speeding bullet, thoughts and words were formed in their unbelieving hearts. Addressing the crowd **they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."** Two realities collided here. *First*, since the miracles Jesus performed were so extraordinary and unnatural, there had to be some supernatural explanation. *Second*, because their minds were already made up that Jesus wasn't the Messiah working miracles in God's power...there could only be one other alternative. The supernatural power behind His miracles must come from the **Beelzebub, the prince of demons!** If not from God, the power must be Satanic!

Now think about this for a moment. These religious men had witnessed the sinlessness of Jesus. They had seen the many benevolent things Jesus did everywhere He went. They had never seen His power used selfishly or for any purpose that didn't result in healing and blessing. But out of the hardness of their hearts, they claimed He was an agent of Satan. By this brazen accusation, they tried to undermine faith and poison the people against Jesus. In **Matt. 18:6** Jesus sternly warns anyone who dissuades someone from believing in Him. **But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.** Do you know what the last words are to a guy thrown into the sea with a millstone hung around his neck? *"Buddy, you're going down!"*

But this miracle and their response illustrated the unreasonableness of their unbelief. Israel's leaders had the genealogies and the prophetic scriptures. They had the witness of John the Baptist and the witness of God the Father and God the Spirit when Jesus was baptized.

They had the witness of the Father's carbon-copy-likeness stamped on in Jesus / and they had the witness of His miracles. But still they refused to believe. In **Jn. 10:37, 38** Jesus spoke to these same leaders and said, **"Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."**

So their accusation was unreasonable and diabolical. Perfect holiness and power was standing right in front of them, but they called it evil! In **Isa. 5:20** the Lord said, **"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."** But this is how warped and deceived Israel's leaders were. And this is true of so many people today. Good is mocked and evil is celebrated. Sin is paraded as virtue. Those who stand for righteousness are persecuted. Worst of all, Jesus is marginalized and hated. But friends a day is coming when God will make all things right and Christ will be exalted! Count on it!

#### 4. The Answers from Jesus - vs. 25-32

**v. 25a - Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them...** Here is a minor miracle and yet another evidence of Christ's deity. **Jesus knew their thoughts.** Jesus exercised the divine attribute of omniscience. No one knows another person's thoughts perfectly or completely, but God does and Jesus does because He is God. The fact that Jesus responded to their thoughts should be like touching a bare wire with 220 volts running through it. So with pin point accuracy, Jesus answered the accusation whispered through the crowd. First Jesus gave them...

- *An answer from logic or common sense – vs. 25b-26 - "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?"*

Why would Satan drive out His own minions? What advantage would Satan gain by working against Himself? **Kingdoms, cities, households** (and churches) are destroyed by discord and disunity when members work against other members. The charge that Jesus cast out demons in the power of Satan made no sense! But hostility and hatred are rarely sensible!

- *An answer exposing their bias – vs. 27, 28 - And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*

Jesus here admits that **your people** (literally *sons of the Pharisees*) had some ability to cast out demons. We see an example of this in **Acts 19:13**. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says these wandering exorcists used exotic formulas and cultic incantations to drive demons out. In **Acts 19** they tried to use the name of Jesus on man possessed by a demon. The Scripture says the man **gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding**. The explanation for non-Christian exorcism may be that Satan at times empowers what appears to be an exorcism to deceive people into believing something about the exorcist. The Bible clearly states that Satanic deception of this sort will increase before Christ returns. But the point Jesus made here is this...*"You approve of exorcisms done by your people without accusing them of doing it in Satan's power. Why do you then accuse Me as you have? What have I done that is different from what they are doing? Ask them where their power comes from. Since you don't believe what I say, let them be your judges."* In this answer, Jesus reveals something we know to be true. There is a deep seated and wide spread bias against Jesus Christ! Israel rejected Him and the Revelation tells us the world will try to reject Jesus again when He returns. The OT prophecy which says, **'They hated me without reason'** is fulfilled with growing intensity! Here Jesus exposed this bias against Him.

But so would be forfeited by the biased position taken by these leaders. So in v. 28 Jesus went on to say, **“if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** In other words Jesus said, *“If what I do is from God, the kingdom of God is here.”* So bear this in mind...you’re not just rejecting Me, but you’re rejecting the kingdom you long for. The average person doesn’t get this. But saying “no” to Jesus is saying “no thank you” to the life and peace and blessing our hearts long for. In **Jn. 5:40** Jesus said, **“you refuse to come to Me to have life.”**

- *An answer revealing His power – v. 29 -* **“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 rob his house.**

In v. 29 Jesus compared Himself to a thief who enters a house and ties up the owner, **the strong man.** With the **strong man** neutralized, He can then claim what he wants from the strong man’s house. In other words, Jesus invaded the house or territory of Satan who is called **the prince of this world.** He came to defeat the Adversary who holds humanity in bondage and to deliver us from Satan’s domain. Maybe you never thought of it this way before, but every believer is stolen property! But this transfer of ownership is what happens the moment a sinner trusts Christ. In **Col. 1:13, 14** Paul wrote, **For He (Jesus) has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** By this wonderful accomplishment, Jesus fulfilled **Isa. 42:7** where it’s promised that God’s Messiah would... **free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.**

**5. The Attitude beyond Forgiveness - vs. 30-32 -** **“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the 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.**

Like a shepherd, Jesus came to gather His sheep. That’s what Jesus is, He’s a gatherer. What are we here this AM? We are the church, the *ecclesia*...which means gathered assembly. Who is responsible for gathering us together? Jesus Christ. He is gathering or building His Church. So look again at v.30. Jesus said, **“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”** There is no neutrality when it comes to Jesus. We are with Him or against Him. And if we are with Him, we will **gather** people to Him just as He does. But those who are against Him **scatter.** That’s what the Pharisees were doing. As they slithered through the crowd in their flowing robes, they whispered, *“this man does miracles in the power of Beelzebub.”* They used their authority and position to undermine faith and **scatter** the people. In **Jn. 10:12** Jesus said, **The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.** We either **gather** or we **scatter.** Those who are with Jesus do all they can to bring others into His Church. Those who are not with Jesus influence people to go another way. Scattering is Satan’s business.

Then comes **vs.31, 32** where Jesus names one sin that is unforgiveable. Here’s a passage that has been interpreted a variety of ways and has caused needless alarm and concern. At the same time, it’s a text of Scripture some well-intentioned preachers have taken out of context and used to frighten people into salvation and service. Let’s read these verses again. **And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the 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.** Notice that twice, Jesus said, the unforgiveable sin involved *speaking against the Holy Spirit.* That’s precisely what the Pharisees were doing.

They committed this sin when they said the miracles Jesus did in the power of the Spirit were done in the power of Satan. They blasphemed the Spirit which means they accused / slandered / reviled / or spoke evil of the Spirit. Now let's ask a question...*"Where did this blasphemy originate?...where did it come from?"* Jesus answered our question in **Matt. 15:19 - For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.** What the Pharisees said came from hearts that were corrupt and unbelieving. In fact, right here in **Matt.12:34** Jesus said, **For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.** Instead of confessing faith in Jesus, they confessed unbelief and hostility toward Him.

So listen...the unforgiveable sin isn't suicide. It isn't merely a sin so serious or so often repeated that God refuses to forgive it. Like certain incurable diseases, it isn't a type of sin there's no remedy for. The unforgiveable sin proceeds from a heart that repeatedly resists and rejects the truth about Christ and our need of Him. According to **v. 31**, even those who may have at onetime made some derogatory and slanderous statements about Jesus can be forgiven! Even Bill Marr can be forgiven!

In his book entitled Baffling Bible Questions Answered, Larry Richards points out, *"This reference to an unforgivable sin has troubled many unnecessarily. Those who are concerned that they have done something for which Jesus will not forgive them have a very different attitude from the Pharisees. They refused to accept even the most compelling evidence that Jesus was the Son of God. The person who rejects the Spirit's message about Jesus will not be forgiven. Anyone who seeks Jesus' forgiveness certainly has not committed the unforgivable sin"*

Scholars Morris and Clark further explain: *"Persons deeply troubled by a guilty conscience often fear they have sinned too grievously for God to forgive and save them. Others, dominated by a carnal, calculating attitude, hope to sin to the limit and then come to Christ to escape the consequences. Thus with radically different motives, both ask 'Is it possible to sin beyond the point of being saved?' But God's ability to save is not limited by man's sinfulness. In fact, every person, before he accepts Jesus Christ as Savior, is in total rebellion against God, though sinfulness may not manifest itself with equal intensity in every person."*

Here's the skinny of it. If you're concerned that you might have committed the unpardonable sin, you surely haven't! Those guilty of this unforgiveable sin aren't concerned in the least! Their hearts are either deceived by self-righteousness or their conscience is desensitized by sin. This sin can't be committed by those who have trusted Christ for salvation! And this sin is not the same as **"the sin that leads to death"** in **I Jn. 5:16, 17!** In the context of John's letter, Christians are warned that God may discipline a sinning believer by taking them home prematurely. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira resulted in death. The same happened to some of the sinning believers at the Church of Corinth. In contrast, physical death is temporal yet the unforgiveable sin is called **an eternal sin** in **Mk. 3:29.**

So in the primary sense, the one sin God can't forgive is the persistent resistance and rejection of Christ whose identity was confirmed by miracles done in the power of the Holy Spirit. According to this definition, some scholars insist that this sin in its primary sense sin can't be committed today because Jesus isn't physically present performing miracles in the Spirit's power. But there's a secondary sense in which this sin can be repeated. If a person hardens their heart and persistently refuses to listen to the Holy Spirit who speaks through the Word of God and the Church...if they die in that Christless condition...there's no further opportunity to be saved. After death, there's no second chance. I hesitate to be so blunt, but teachings about Purgatory and the notion of a second chance to be saved in the afterlife...are a hoax / a crock / wishful thinking and a man-made distortion of God's truth! **Heb. 9:27** says, **man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.** In **Jn. 8:24** Jesus said, **"if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."**

This was the sad condition of the Pharisees. And this is the condition of so many who resist the Savior who loves them and wants to forgive them. How irrational is that? We resist and hold at arms length the God who wants to exchange our sin for His righteousness. The God who wants to forgive us and give us His gift of eternal life! **Heb. 1:7** pleads with any who may be doubtful or unbelieving... "**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.**"