

Copyright © Two Journeys Ministry

Andrew M. Davis Sermon

Notes www.twojourneys.org

Please use in accordance with the copyright policy found at twojourneys.org

The Unforgivable Sin

Mark 3:28-30

The timeless allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*, depicts the journey of a man from being lost, living in the City of Destruction, to faith in Christ and then through many dangers, toils, and snares, to finally cross the river of death to live forever in the Celestial City. The author, John Bunyan, wrote it to instruct Christians about many aspects of the Christian life. In the allegory, the main character, a man named Christian, early in his pilgrimage spends time in the home of a man named Interpreter. In that man's home, he sees many symbolic scenes which teach him important lessons he will need for his journey.

The most sobering, even terrifying vignette he was shown was a very dark room and a forlorn man locked within an iron cage. This man is in a desperate condition, because he is convinced he has sinned his way out of heaven and there's nothing he can do to be saved. He has in some way committed the unpardonable sin.

Christian asks him, "What are you?" The man says, "I was once a fair and flourishing Christian, both in my own eyes and in the eyes of others. I was convinced I was going to the Celestial City."

Christian says to him, "That's good. But what are you now?"

The man answers, "I am now a man of despair. I am shut up in this iron cage. I cannot get out... Oh now I cannot!!"

Christian asked him, "How did you come into this condition?"

The man answered, "I stopped being careful about watching over my soul. I gave free reins to sin. I sinned against the light of the Word and the goodness of God. I have grieved the Spirit and he is gone. I tempted the devil, and he has come to me. I have provoked God to anger and he has left me. I have so hardened my heart that I *cannot* turn."

Christian then asked him, "Is there no hope, but that you must be kept in the iron cage of despair?"

The man answered, "No, none at all."

Christian said, "Why?! The Son of the Blessed is very merciful!"

But the man wailed, "I have crucified him to myself all over again. I have despised his person. I have despised his holiness. I have considered his blood an unholy thing. I have shown contempt to the Spirit of mercy. Therefore, I have shut myself out of all the promises of God, and there now remains to me nothing but threatenings, dreadful threatenings, fearful threatenings of certain judgment and fiery anger, which will devour me as an enemy."

Christian asked, "For what did you bring yourself into this condition?"

The man answered, "For the desires, pleasures, and gains of this world, in the enjoyment of which I promised myself much delight. But now every one of them bites me like a burning worm."

Christian asked, "But can you not even now turn to God?"

The man cried out, "God no longer invites me to come to him. His word gives me no encouragement to believe. God himself is the one who shut me in this cage, and no one in the world can let me out. O eternity, eternity, how shall I grapple with the misery that I must meet in eternity!"

That is one of the most sobering and terrifying portions of Pilgrim's Progress. And it raises the question of an unpardonable sin. That is a topic raised in a statement made by Jesus Christ to his enemies in Mark 3 – a sin that can never be forgiven in this age or even out to eternity:

Mark 3:29 whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.

I. Is There an Unforgiveable Sin?

A. Surprising, Given the Wide Mercy and Forgiveness of God

1. Jesus himself in this very passage asserted the width of God's amazing mercy

Mark 3:28 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.

2. Jesus' solemn oath... "Truly I say to you"
 - a. Greek "Amen"
 - b. Jesus often used this word, sometimes doubling it for emphasis... "Amen amen..." "Truly truly"
 - c. Though everything Jesus said was true, this is a way of saying "Pay very close attention to these words"
 - d. And he is asserting the width and breadth and depth of God's commitment to forgive sinners

Mark 3:28 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.

3. Jesus came into the world to save sinners...

1 Timothy 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.

4. Many scriptures assert the wideness of God's amazing grace and mercy

Psalm 103:10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

Psalm 103:12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Micah 7:18-19 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. ¹⁹ You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

5. So the amazing track record of God's forgiveness stands for all time:

Abraham's lying is forgiven. Moses's murder is forgiven. David's lust and adultery and bloodguilt, all forgiven. Jonah's rebellion and running the opposite direction from the will of God for his life, forgiven. Manasseh forgiven for passing his son through the fire as an offering to Molech. Incredible what God will forgive! Augustine, forgiven for his fornication! Luther forgiven for his blasphemy, when he said to his father confessor, "Love God? I hate him!" Forgiven for that! John Newton, forgiven for his slave trading and his dissolute drunken life. All manner of sin and blasphemy will be forgiven. Heaven is going to be filled with repentant adulterers and fornicators and homosexuals and liars and thieves and murderers.

AMAZING GRACE, HOW SWEET THE SOUND THAT SAVED A WRETCH LIKE ME!!!

We should all be staggered and amazed at the first part of Jesus' statement, that all manner of sins and blasphemies will be forgiven men. That the Holy God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, is willing to forgive any sin at all is amazing.

But once we see the wideness of God's grace, and how astonishingly willing he is to forgive, and how he was willing to pour out his beloved Son's blood even to death to achieve forgiveness of sins for a multitude greater than anyone could count from every

nation on earth... once we take that in, the amazement in this statement from Jesus swings the other way

6. It seems very stunning that there could be a sin that God will never forgive!

B. But Jesus Clearly Asserts Here: There IS an Unforgivable Sin!

Mark 3:29 But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.

And as Matthew's account expands:

Matthew 12:32 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.

1. No one in history has been as blasphemed as Jesus Christ; how many times every single day is his name spoken of as a curse word, whenever lost people are angry or smash their thumbs with a hammer... Jesus said he is willing to forgive all those words spoken against him
2. But he said blasphemy against the Spirit is a sin that will never be forgiven... even into eternity
3. In Mark's account, Jesus calls it "**an eternal sin**"
4. Human beings can frequently overstate their rage concerning a sin committed against them... "I will never forget, I will never forgive!" But then, they later change their mind
5. God is not like that
6. If he says a sin will never be forgiven into eternity, that is absolutely true...
7. God will not later change his mind... his verdict is final, more than if it were engraved with a steel stylus in a tablet of granite

So... to answer this first question... YES, Jesus teaches that there is such a sin, an unforgiveable sin

II. What Is the Unforgiveable Sin?

A. The Clear Answer: Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

Mark 3:29 whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."

What is that??

Blasphemy is a verbal sin... to speak wicked words about God

Matthew's Gospel makes it plain that Jesus was teaching about WORDS:

Matthew 12:31-37 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² 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. ³³ "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

So, blasphemy has to do with WORDS SPOKEN that flow from the heart; they are a true reflection of the heart condition

Jesus said it because of the words spoken about his ministry by the Scribes (teachers of the Law) who had come from Jerusalem

This was their official verdict:

Mark 3:22 "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

So Jesus responds about their statement:

Mark 3:28-30 I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. ²⁹ But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." ³⁰ He said this because they were saying, "He has an evil spirit."

That was the reason why he said it.

B. The Central Issue: Jesus' Miracles

1. The immediate context is the scribes of Jerusalem were asserting that Jesus was doing miracles, specifically driving out demons, by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons
2. Jesus has been doing a river of signs and wonders, most of them healings

Matthew 4:24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

3. By far the most spectacular healings were of demon-possessed people
 - a. The demons would often make a huge scene when they came out, screaming, causing a man to foam at the mouth
 - b. It was obvious that something awesome in power was happening
4. People were forming opinions about him... seeking to understand him... Who he was? What was the source of his power?

Mark 1:27 The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching-- and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him."

After the stilling of the storm:

Mark 4:41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

In his hometown:

Mark 6:2-3 "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles!"

In Herod's court:

Mark 6:14-15 King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

Jesus himself will ask his own disciples this key question:

Mark 8:29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

5. This is the most significant issue we will ever face... the identity of Jesus Christ

C. Jesus' Claim to Deity

1. As people were wrestling with the identity of Jesus, most people looked on him positively, as a good man from God who had a lot of compassion, said wise things, and somehow could do these healings... but they were not fully at the point of faith in who he really was
2. Jesus would eventually force all of them to a decision point by his claims
3. Fundamental to this is that Jesus was claiming to be God in the flesh, as we said last week!
 - a. He claimed the power to forgive sins... something only God could do
 - b. He claimed to be "Lord of the Sabbath"... something only God could say
 - c. He would later say these fateful words:

John 8:58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

There is no doubt that Jesus was claiming to be GOD!

D. Fundamental to Resolving the Issue was the Miracles

1. The signs were given by God as proof, evidence of Jesus' deity

Mark 2:10-12 ***But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...."*** *He said to the paralytic,* ¹¹ *"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."* ¹² *He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.*

See the logic! Because I do this miracle, you know I have the power to forgive sins. Because I do this miracle, you know I am God in the flesh.

Jesus acknowledged that the signs were necessary to our faith:

John 4:48 *"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."*

Again, in John 5, Jesus was accused of blasphemy because he called God his Father, making himself equal with God:

John 5:36 *"I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.*

In other words, the miracles give proof that he IS equal to God

Then, to his own disciples, the night before he was crucified:

John 14:11 *Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.*

And then, culminating in the gospel's summary statement:

John 20:30-31 *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*

2. So... for our salvation, God ordained that Jesus would do all these miracles; the miracles are the basis of our faith in Christ as God

3. The two central, essential miracles you must believe in order to be saved is the INCARNATION (that Jesus was God in a human body) and RESURRECTION (that Jesus rose from the dead)

Romans 10:9 if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

E. The Miracles Are Done BY THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

The incarnation was done by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the angel told Mary:

Luke 1:35 "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

The resurrection was done by the power of the Holy Spirit:

Romans 1:4 through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

And ALL the other miracles were also done by the power of the Holy Spirit:

Acts 10:38 God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

1. Specifically here, Jesus claimed to be driving out demons by the Spirit of God

Matthew 12:27-28 if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

2. The Scribes looked directly at the work of Jesus by the power of the HOLY Spirit of God and instead they BLASPHEMED

Mark 3:22 "He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

3. The blasphemy against the Spirit then is to look at all the evidence the Spirit has given for the deity of Christ—all his signs and wonders—and willfully and maliciously choose to ascribe that power to the devil

Jesus said it was a sin that would never be forgiven, not in this age, or for eternity to come.

Why not? Because there was nothing else God was going to do to prove the identity of his Son... they had seen it all:

Ecclesiastes 12:13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter

Hebrews 10:26-27 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

F. Could Someone Have Committed this Sin and Still Lived for a While on Earth?

1. Yes, it seems so...

Matthew 12:32 anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

2. So, the dreadful and terrifying conclusion is that there were people who did commit the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and who walked in unforgiveness for the rest of their lives

3. Why? Because God would not work repentance in them!!

Mark 1:15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Acts 11:18 God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

This work of repentance is done BY THE SPIRIT!

John 16:8 When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment

But if the person is ascribing all Jesus' miracles to Satan, there is no further work the Spirit will do. They are willfully rejecting all the work of the Spirit pointing toward Christ as the Son of God.

III. How Should We Live in Light of the Unforgiveable Sin?

A. Can Anyone Commit This Sin Today?

1. Answer: I don't really know... perhaps it was unique to that moment, to literally seeing with your own eyes the miracles of Jesus, seeing many of them, a river of them, and concluding that Jesus was doing them all by the power of Satan
2. However, we do read these words in the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

I pondered this deeply when I preached through it... and I struggled with the words "It is impossible."

Because in another place, Jesus these words about human salvation:

Mark 10:27 "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

However, if God himself will not renew these people to repentance, they will never repent! That is what makes it impossible

Those Hebrew people in that era had also seen the wonder-working power of the Holy Spirit of God:

Hebrews 2:3-4 This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

So, perhaps the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was limited to the era of Christ and his apostles, when miracles were flowing by the power of the Holy Spirit

Later in the Book of Hebrews, it says this:

Hebrews 10:26-29 *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?*

Notice the last statement: apostates have INSULTED THE SPIRIT OF GRACE!

So, it seems there is a lasting warning in the Book of Hebrews that the Holy Spirit intends every generation of Christian to heed

Sin is dangerous! We never know how much we can play with it and reach a breaking point where the Spirit will not convict us and bring us back

B. John Piper's Advice: Run from Sin with Fear and Trembling!

“The fact that there is an unforgivable sin — that there comes a point in a life of sin after which the Holy Spirit will no longer grant repentance — that fact 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 life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.’*”

“Many professing Christians today have such a sentimental view of God’s justice that they never feel terror and horror at the thought of being utterly forsaken by God because of their persistence in sin. They 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 withdraws 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. The Spirit of holiness has forsaken the arrogant sinner forever.”

C. Bottom Line: Comforting the Disturbed, and Disturbing the Comfortable

A Puritan pastor many years ago said that faithful preaching of God’s Word should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.

Some come to pastors worried they have committed the unforgiveable sin. A good pastor should set that question aside and instead minister healthy holiness as our greatest assurance.

Almost certainly no one who is deeply worried about blasphemy against the Spirit has committed that sin. Do you look at the miracles of Christ and genuinely think they were done by Satan’s power? I have never met anyone like that. But there may be some people who think like that today.

But what about other sins?

The healthiest a Christian can be is 1) accepting justification ...
knowing ALL MY SINS ARE FORGIVEN BY FAITH IN

CHRIST ALONE; 2) embracing sanctification by a JOINT EFFORT between the indwelling Holy Spirit and the Christian... and are putting sin to death by the Spirit

There is a healthy fear of sin all Christians should have:

As God said to Israel at Mt. Sinai,

Exodus 20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

And the whole book of Hebrews is written to give us a healthy warning against the hardening powers of sin:

Hebrews 3:7-8 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, ⁸ do not harden your hearts

The Holy Spirit warns us against falling away... against apostasy... and the encroaching power of sin:

Hebrews 3:12-13 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Sin has a hardening effect on all of us... and the danger of apostasy is real in every generation, even if we do not find it to be the same as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

However you are playing with sin now, FLEE from it! Be deeply concerned lest you end up like Bunyan's man in the iron cage.

And if any of you have heard the gospel many times and still haven't repented, how many more chances do you think the Holy Spirit owes you.

There comes a point in which he has shown you everything he is going to... there will be no new insights, no new miracle stories, no new inducements. It's now or never.