

ASK ANYTHING (3)

What is the unforgivable sin?

A. Introduction

1. There is a sin so bad that Jesus says it cannot be forgiven.

“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.” (Matthew 12:31-32)

What is this unforgivable sin?

2. Why is it important to spend time looking at Jesus’ words about this sin that cannot be forgiven?

They are famous words: Lots of people outside the church are aware of Jesus’ words about the unforgivable sin.

They are troubling words: We might worry that we have committed it accidentally.

They are confusing words: What is this sin that Jesus is talking about? Can we know if someone has committed it?

They are serious words: The fact that they appear in more than one Gospel account suggests that Jesus wants us to especially pay attention to them.

They are purposeful words: Jesus had a particular reason for saying them when He did.

3. In order to understand Jesus’ words rightly, and answer the question, ‘What is the unforgivable sin?’ we need to look at when Jesus said them.

In Matthew’s Gospel they are found in chapter 12.

Previous verses in the chapter tells us about an ongoing clash Jesus had with the Pharisees over what He and His disciples were allowed to do on the Sabbath.

“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.” (Matthew 12:14)

In Mark’s Gospel they are found in chapter 3.

The preceding verses give proof that Jesus is the Promised Messiah, as He demonstrates His authority over people, evil spirits, sickness and sin. But this brings Him into conflict with the religious leaders for saying He could forgive sins and because He healed on the Sabbath.

“Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” (Mark 3:6)

In Luke’s Gospel, the actual words Jesus spoke about the unforgivable sin are recorded in Luke 12:10, but the incident that prompted Him to speak them in Matthew and Mark’s accounts we find in Luke 11.

Prior to this we read that Jesus had begun the journey to Jerusalem that will lead to His death on the cross; taught His disciples about the cost of following Him; and sent out 72 of His followers to preach about the kingdom of God.

The only Gospel that does not mention either Jesus’ words regarding the unforgivable sin or what prompted them is John’s Gospel.

But John’s Gospel does give us a helpful insight into the rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees that occurred in the events leading up to Him saying these words.

“Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him

go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:47-48)

The Pharisees we see knew exactly who Jesus was. Yet because He didn't match up to their expectations of the Messiah and was threatening their status, they rejected Him and wanted Him dead.

B. What is this sin that Jesus says cannot be forgiven?

1. It is an unusual sin.

"And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." (Matthew 12:31)

Jesus reminds everyone who is listening, that except for one specific type of blasphemy, forgiveness is available for every sin and blasphemy.

We still need to repent and believe in Jesus.

But this extraordinary statement about God's mercy and compassion, is there to reassure us, that if we do, all our sin and wrongdoing will be forgiven.

"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." (Isaiah 55:6-7)

This sin that Jesus says cannot be forgiven is not a common sin.

2. It is a deliberate sin.

Those who commit this sin know exactly what they are doing.

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

This sin that Jesus says cannot be forgiven is not an accidental sin.

"Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." (1 Timothy 1:12-13)

3. It is a permanent sin.

The person who commits this sin has passed the point of no return.

"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, 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." (Hebrews 6:4-6)

This sin puts you beyond repentance and therefore beyond forgiveness. This is why it will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come.

4. It is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

"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." (Matthew 12:31-32)

"I tell you the truth, 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." (Mark 3:28-29)

"And 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." (Luke 12:10)

What does it mean to blaspheme the Holy Spirit?

As it is the Holy Spirit's work to open our eyes and to grant repentance and faith, to reject His work is to shut yourself off from the only One who could ever bring you to repentance.

A person does this when, after seeing all the evidence necessary to believe in Christ, with their eyes fully enlightened to the truth, they knowingly choose to reject Him.

5. It is the sin the Pharisees had committed.

The Pharisees had seen the miraculous signs and wonders that Jesus performed and knew that this meant He fitted the description of the Messiah given in the Old Testament Scriptures.

"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. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:22-23)

The Pharisees in the face of overwhelming evidence chose to reject Jesus and attributed the work He did in the power of the Holy Spirit to Satan.

"But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons." (Matthew 12:24)

They committed the unforgivable sin.

C. Why does Jesus tell us about this sin that cannot be forgiven?

1. To condemn His enemies (the Pharisees).

Jesus is pronouncing His judgment upon them.

They had rejected their last opportunity to repent and be forgiven, and from this point on in the narrative, their doom is sealed.

In the verses that follow, we don't see Jesus plead with them. Instead he publicly addresses them as His enemies.

"You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?" (Matthew 12:34)

"Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation ask for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (Matthew 12:38-39)

"The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." (Matthew 12:41)

"The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here." (Matthew 12:42)

2. To warn His friends (the Disciples).

This warning about the unforgivable sin was a means that Jesus used to urge them to persevere to the end.

"They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." (1 John 2:19)

This warning about the unforgivable sin was a means that Jesus used to urge them to display the fruit of saving faith in their lives.

"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 recognised by its fruit." (Matthew 12:33)

3. To plead with those who hadn't made up their mind yet (Judas).

Judas would have been among the disciples who heard Jesus' warning.

He had not made up his mind that he was going to betray Christ.

In fact, he had stayed with Jesus when many other disciples had deserted him.

"From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!" (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.) (John 6:66-71)

Unlike the Pharisees, he had not committed the unforgivable sin, yet.

"The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." (Matthew 26:24)

Jesus was pleading with Judas to become a true follower of Jesus.

D. So what...?

1. To those who are worried:

If you are concerned enough to pray to God for forgiveness, you haven't committed this sin.

2. To those who are faithful:

We don't need to live in fear, but we should test ourselves to see if we are in the faith.

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5)

3. To those who are undecided:

If you are not with Christ, you are against Him.

"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." (Matthew 12:30)

4. To those who are unrepentant:

All sin is unforgivable if it is not repented of.

"But the cowardly, the unbelieving... their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur." (Revelation 21:8)