

# A Plea to Judas

Matthew 12:30-32

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We've been looking at Matthew 12, and we are focusing on a very difficult section of that chapter. It's the passage where Jesus speaks of the unforgivable sin. We looked carefully at that text back at the end of February, and we considered the nature of the unpardonable sin. We observed that it's an uncommon sin, not a common one; it's a deliberate sin, not one you can commit accidentally; and it's a sin of the heart more than a sin of the lips. In fact, what makes the unforgivable sin unforgivable is the state of the heart of the person who commits this sin.

We surveyed what Scripture says about the infinite mercy of God and observed that if this one particular sin is "unforgivable," it *cannot* be because of any deficiency in God's mercy or lovingkindness to sinners. *God* stands willing to forgive any sinner who repents and seeks forgiveness, no matter how dark the sin or how sordid the sinner's past. He will save the very chief of sinners. Jesus underscores that in verse 31: **"every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people."** Verse 32, even if you "[speak] a word against the Son of Man [such a sin can] be forgiven."

But here's one sin that *cannot* be forgiven, and it's not because there's not enough forgiveness in God to pardon the sinner, but because the sin itself is the ultimate expression of a heart that has already rejected the Holy Spirit's final plea for repentance. Jesus calls it "**the blasphemy against the Spirit.**"

And as we saw, that definite pronoun is significant. It's the singular act of blasphemy against the Spirit of God. This is not just any casual kind of careless speech or insult aimed at the Holy Spirit or invoking His name in vain. It is a specific kind of blasphemy that reflects a permanently hardened heart—a heart that has already sealed itself closed against the light of revelation and the final urgent pleadings of the Holy Spirit. It's a decisive, once-and-for-all renunciation of the truth—after the truth has already been clearly seen and fully understood. It is such a deliberate rejection of the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry that it utterly and permanently sears the conscience and seals the heart against God forever.

*Last* week, we probed the question of why Jesus made this pronouncement when He did. We asked why it was an important admonition for the disciples to hear, and we reflected on the question of why Scripture records this incident in all three synoptic gospels.

Jesus didn't explain the unpardonable sin in any great detail. We have to gather everything we can about its precise nature from two short verses in Matthew (vv. 31-32) and their context. There's also one verse each in Mark 3:28 and Luke 12:10, and the context in those passages is essentially the same.

So the boundaries of this sin are a little bit hazy. Plus, the idea of an unpardonable sin is a deeply troubling thought. It frightens a lot of people who read this passage. I *know* it does, because I've lost count of how many people I have spoken to personally over the years who have brought this passage up in our conversations and (in many cases) expressed a fear that they might be guilty of this sin.

But it is recorded for our benefit—as an admonition we need to hear and heed. And (like all of Scripture) it is **"profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."**

So last week we began talking about why Jesus made such an emphatic statement within earshot of His disciples about a sin that could never be forgiven—and yet there's no record that he said anything privately to them to tone down the frightening potential of unpardonable sin. He doesn't reassure them or comfort them with any guarantee that *they* couldn't possibly commit such a sin—even though Scripture repeatedly promises elsewhere that no true believer can ever

come into condemnation—we who believe have already passed out of death into eternal life.

So last week we took a closer look at this text and its immediate context.

And we saw first of all that for the Pharisees who had just denounced Jesus' miracles as the work of Satan, this was a straightforward pronouncement of doom. It wasn't a warning, a threat, or a *plea* of any kind. It was a summary statement of final judgment. These blaspheming Pharisees were doomed, and from this point on, that is how Jesus dealt with them. He minces no words.

In fact, before the end of Matthew 12, He tells them in at least three different ways that they are going to hell. In verse 34, he calls them "**[the offspring] of vipers!**" He calls them "**evil and adulterous**" in verse 39, and he says in verse 41 that the men of Nineveh would "**rise up at the judgment . . . and condemn [them]**." He says again in verse 42 that "**The queen of the South will [likewise] rise up at the judgment . . . and condemn [them]**."

Then in verses 43-45, he gives an illustration—not quite a parable, but close—where a demon is cast out of someone, wanders in the wilderness for awhile, then comes back and finds his original home still barren and unoccupied, so he drags seven other demons along—all of them more evil than the original demon—"**and the last state of that person is worse than the first.**" Notice the end of verse 45. Here's Jesus' point

in that illustration: "**So also will it be with this evil generation.**" Which is to say once more that He considered those Pharisees a lost cause. They were already damned—forsaken by God, inhabited by demons, and much worse off than they had been before they refused the Holy Spirit entry into their souls.

So, to remind you once more—for the Pharisees who blasphemed the Holy Spirit, this was a pronouncement of doom.

Then we said last week that for the disciples, this was a solemn warning. They were about to be sifted like wheat—tempted by the devil, tormented by the world, and tested by the remainder of their own flesh. They came dangerously close to denying Christ and simply going back to whatever they were doing before He called them. He *knew* that trial was coming, and this incident was one of several object lessons he used to prepare them for it. They had heard the Pharisees' deliberate blasphemy. They saw the evil inherent in that kind of hostile rejection of Christ. They knew Jesus' enemies were liars and evildoers, even though the Pharisees wore priestly garments and religious garb and made a great show of their external piety.

And when the disciples' courage failed and they themselves fled in fear on the night Jesus was betrayed, their faith nevertheless remained intact. Although Peter denied that he *knew* Christ, he did not renounce Him or say anything

hateful about Him. Above all, he did not abandon his faith in the Savior. His sin, though serious, was forgivable.

Peter might have *wondered* or even *doubted* whether his sin was forgivable. Remember that he announced that he was going back to fishing (John 21:3)—certainly *not* because he was finished with Christ, but *perhaps* because he feared that Christ was finished with him.

The others went fishing with Him, too, and they fished all night but caught nothing. Then at daybreak, Jesus met them on the shore with their breakfast. He made the overture of forgiveness, probably because Peter was too fearful to do it himself. But Christ coaxed from Peter three affirmations of his love—one each for the three times Peter had denied knowing Christ. And Christ formally commissioned Peter there on the shore of Galilee. From that point on, Peter was a different kind of man. He makes the starkest possible contrast with Judas, even though in the most superficial way, their sins *looked* similar. And when you compare the sins of Peter and Judas with the blasphemy uttered by these Pharisees in Matthew 12, the similarity is disturbing as well. But the differences are what stand out when you examine each case, and that is what we began doing last week.

That should catch you up if you weren't here last week.

Now, bear this in mind: There were three categories of people surrounding Jesus in Matthew 12—Jesus' enemies (the blaspheming Pharisees), Jesus' friends (the believing

disciples), and those who considered themselves neither (which would include Judas and who-knows-how-many people in the surrounding crowds). Jesus had a message for each group.

His statement about the unpardonable sin was (first) a pronouncement of doom on the Pharisees, (second) a solemn warning to the disciples, and (third) an earnest plea to Judas in particular. And last week we needed to stop before I could develop this third point. And that's what I want to do today. If you kept your outline from last week, we had three points—three reasons this one singular mention of the unpardonable sin is important enough to be mentioned in each of the synoptic gospels: 1. It was a Judgment Against the Pharisees; 2. It was a Warning for the Disciples; and 3. It was *a Plea to Judas*.

Now today I want to take up that third point, and I'm going to give you a new three-point outline that serves as a subset of last week's third point, so if your notes from last week are full, you might want to start fresh.

I've mentioned Peter's failure in particular. We tend to single him out because Scripture does, but in fairness to Peter, we ought to remember that Peter was indeed prepared to cross swords with the men who arrested Jesus. He had enough faith to believe that as long as he was with Jesus, he would be able to defeat a whole garrison of Roman soldiers.

But violence was the wrong response in this case, and Jesus rebuked Peter and told him to put his sword away.

Short of physical violence, Peter couldn't seem to envision what an appropriate response to Jesus' arrest might be. But he wasn't alone in this. Almost as soon as Jesus was taken into custody, Mark 14:50 says, "**they all forsook him, and fled.**" Give Peter credit for following at a distance. We're told in Matthew 26:58 that Peter followed "**as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see [how this would all come out].**" John 18:15 says, "**Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did another disciple.**" That other disciple was undoubtedly John, who carefully keeps himself anonymous in his gospel until the very end. So Peter and John followed Jesus from a distance, and the other disciples just melted into the night.

The difference between Judas's sin and Peter's perfectly illustrates the difference between forgivable and unforgivable sin. Judas's sin was a planned and deliberate rejection—a *renunciation*; a *betrayal*—of Christ. Peter's sin was an unexpected, spur-of-the-moment, careless denial of Peter's own relationship with Christ. Judas had remorse, but he responded to it by sealing his fate by an act of suicide. Peter's remorse led to authentic repentance—and therefore he sought and found forgiveness in Christ.

As I said earlier, it may seem superficially like Peter's sin was of the same flavor as Judas's. Peter denied Christ three

times, in a public setting, under the most casual kind of questioning, and he made his denial emphatic with cursing and swearing. It was certainly a serious sin—and perhaps we could borrow Jesus' words from Matthew 12:32 and put Peter in the category of those who are guilty of "**speak[ing] a word against the Son of Man.**"

But Judas's sin was a *deliberate* rejection of everything he knew to be true about Jesus. It was as if Judas took every advantage the Holy Spirit had ever given him and deliberately trashed it all at once. I think it's fascinating that Judas was in the presence of Jesus, in the Upper Room, of all places, when Scripture says (in John 13:27) that "**Satan entered into him.**" He made up his mind to betray Christ, closed his heart and mind forever against the convicting work Holy Spirit, and opened the door of his soul to the devil. And immediately, Jesus turned to him and said, "**What you are going to do, do quickly.**" All of Judas's sins therefore became unforgivable—if not at that precise point when Satan entered his heart, certainly at the point where he ended his earthly misery with a craven act of suicide.

Now, some perceptive seminary student might ask, "*Where do you find Judas in Matthew 12?*" He is not specifically mentioned by name in this chapter. And that's true. But he is there. Notice that all the disciples are present with Jesus throughout this chapter. In verse 1, you have Jesus traveling through grain fields with his disciples, and

that is the incident that begins this series of conflicts with the Pharisees. At the end of the chapter (verse 49), Jesus **"stretch[es] out his hand toward his disciples [and says], 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'"** So the whole chapter is sandwiched between two statements showing that the disciples were right there with Jesus, and their presence permeates the events of the chapter.

Second, aside from these Pharisees who actually blasphemed the Holy Spirit, Judas is the one most prominent figure in the gospel accounts of whom we can say with absolute certainty that he entered eternity with unforgiven sin. *(I'm not suggesting that he's the only prominent New Testament character who will face condemnation in the final judgment—far from it. We meet plenty of unbelievers in the New Testament, and Scripture indicates that all of them who died in unbelief will face eternal condemnation and the fires of hell. But that judgment is committed to Christ, and not to you and me. It was extremely rare for Christ to make any declaration of someone's eternal doom the way he does repeatedly in this chapter. And it was even more rare for Him to single out one particular individual and pronounce the person's doom. But in the case of Judas, he made it clear that Judas faced an eternity of condemnation.)* In Matthew 26:24, Jesus says, **"Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."**

So it is clear in Scripture that Judas died without forgiveness for his sins.

But here in Matthew 12, when the Pharisees were blaspheming the Holy Spirit and Jesus was pronouncing *their* doom, Judas stands with the other disciples on Jesus' side of the conflict. He had not yet done or said or planned any scheme against Christ that would have put his sins in the category of the *unpardonable*.

In fact, as I said last week, on a superficial level, Judas was probably the *best* of the disciples. He was evidently deemed the most trustworthy in the band by the other disciples, because they had made him their treasurer. He wasn't prone to saying brash and foolish things like Peter—or if he was, there's little evidence of it in the New Testament. The one time Jesus rebuked him for something he said was when he complained (in John 12:5) about a woman who anointed Jesus' feet with some very expensive ointment. And trust me, it was *very* expensive stuff—worth a full year's wages for the average working man. Judas said, "**Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?**"—and Jesus told him to leave the woman alone. But Matthew 26:8 indicates that *all* the disciples were indignant about what they perceived to be a major waste. In their eyes, Judas probably came across as bold and pious for voicing the protest they all felt.

*Not one of them* suspected him, even when Jesus told them expressly that one of their own small group of twelve would betray him for money and turn him over to be killed. Like I said last week, they all suspected themselves more than Judas. To anyone familiar with the group of disciples, on a superficial level at least, Judas looked like a true disciple.

Let me pause and say this here: That's often the way it is. The most stunning betrayals always come from the people you would least expect to be traitors. I mentioned last week that I have known several people over the years who gave every appearance of being sound, solid, devoted believers—people who knew Scripture well and made a clear profession of faith. In some cases they were men whom I looked to as leaders—people I would go for counsel or advice when I needed wisdom. But they turned against Christ and abandoned the faith. We had one guy who did some work for us as a consultant at Grace to You. He lived in another state, and did free-lance consulting work for ministries like ours. You would recognize his name if I gave it, because his father was a well-known Christian leader and author. And after his father died, this guy completely abandoned the faith. He is angry and hostile against Christianity today.

That happens. And Scripture recognizes that it happens. And it happens for a reason. First John 2:19: "**They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they**

would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." There are judases in the church, even today. We usually don't recognize them *until* they commit some act of gross apostasy, but we're commanded to be on guard against that tendency—and not only in others. It's a good idea for each of us periodically to **"Examine [ourselves], to see whether [we] are in the faith."** In fact, that's the command of 2 Corinthians 13:5, and it goes hand in hand with 1 Corinthians 11:28, which suggests that this kind of self-examination should take place every time we come to the Lord's table: **"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."**

Those verses don't mean that we need to live in fear or constantly be raising doubts about our own salvation, but they *do* underscore the reality that a fallen human heart is artfully deceptive, and lots of people have fooled themselves into thinking they are spiritually OK when in reality they are fence-sitters, uncommitted, indifferent toward Christ, even though they claim to be His followers.

That was precisely Judas's situation on the day these Pharisees blasphemed the Holy Spirit. Judas had publicly identified with Christ. He joined the small band of disciples who followed Him wherever he went, and he gave every appearance of faithfulness. But it was only superficial. Judas remained an unbeliever. There's no suggestion—ever—that Judas opposed Christ or even challenged anything he taught.

Except for that one incident where he questioned the stewardship of a woman who broke an expensive alabaster vial of very costly perfume to anoint Jesus' feet, we have no record that Judas had ever raised any question about the truthfulness or propriety of Jesus' teaching.

In fact, in John 6, when it seemed the whole world was turning against Jesus, Judas stayed with him, along with the other eleven disciples. If Judas had deep doubts about Jesus or serious objections to anything Jesus taught, he did an amazing job of keeping it a secret—from everyone but Christ, who knew his heart. As the crowds that followed Jesus began to find the teaching too harsh, and the numbers dissipated and people became angry and got offended at Jesus' message, Jesus turned to the twelve, and John 6:67 tells us He said, **"Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"**

Judas kept quiet and let Peter speak for him, too. Of course, Jesus knew his heart, and the apostle John reminds us of that fact. In verse 70, Jesus answers, and his answer is not only to Peter, but to all twelve of them: **"Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil."** [and John adds this:] **He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him."**

Still, up to this point, Judas's only sin was indecision. Well—indecision coated with a veneer of hypocrisy. He was secretly undecided about Christ. The fact that he never chimed in along with any of Jesus' detractors suggests that Judas was perhaps *trying* to be neutral. He was sitting on the fence. He was just like myriads of church-goers, who show an interest in Christ and pretend to follow Him, but never really commit their hearts and lives to him. They are unsaved people who try to act like they are saved. And oftentimes, I think people who do this imagine that if they can just keep up the pretense long enough, they will eventually morph into authentic Christians. Some of them seem to hang around the church because they think they'll be born again by osmosis rather than by **"the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit."**

If that describes *you*, you need to listen carefully this morning. Because I'm convinced that Jesus' mention of unpardonable sin was at least in part an earnest plea to Judas and every fence-sitter who follows the pattern of Judas.

And I see three vital lessons in this twelfth chapter of Matthew that applied to Judas in a unique and specific sense. The same three lessons apply to every person who is in the same spiritual state Judas was in that day: anyone who is undecided, secretly neutral, pretending to believe in Christ but devoid of any true love for Him. That includes people who halt between two opinions year after year; men who

keep up a thin veneer of Christian belief just to keep their wives happy; young people who profess faith in Christ because they don't want their parents to badger them about their unbelief; people who get in the habit of pretending to be Christians and do it for so long that they even fool themselves; people who have cherry-picked aspects of Jesus' teaching that they like but who secretly revolt at His demand to be lord of everything in your life. *All* of those are false kinds of faith, and if any one of them describes the nature of your relationship with Christ, there's an earnest plea for you in and around these words about unforgivable sin. Let's look at it.

Here are three lessons for half-hearted disciples, and we'll take them in the order they appear in the text. Number one is a simple, straightforward truth—

## 1. NEUTRALITY IS IMPOSSIBLE

Notice verse 30, immediately before those famous words about unpardonable sin. Jesus says, "**Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.**" The gospel is so exclusive, and Christ's demands are so universal and so pressing, that you cannot possibly hear the message and remain neutral. When it comes to following Christ, indecision, hesitation, and procrastination are all forms of unbelief. That's because the gospel *demand*s a response, one way or the other. To delay is to defy the gospel's demand for repentance. Acts 17:30: "**The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now [NOW] he commands all people everywhere to repent.**"

Let me say it another way: the gospel message presents Christ as Lord and calls for our unconditional surrender to His authority. Therefore indecision is not merely "neutral"; it is *evil*. That's what Jesus is saying here.

Matthew Henry says that somewhere in these verses, Jesus seems to turn from the Pharisees to the people, and he moves from disputing to instructing. There's undoubtedly some truth in that. However, if you look at verse 25, Matthew says Jesus knew the thoughts of the Pharisees, so he addressed these things "**to them.**" And then Jesus continues uninterrupted from the middle of verse 25 to the end of verse 37. That whole section is one short discourse about impossible things. Verses 25-29 is about the

impossibility of Satan being divided against himself. Verse 30 is about the impossibility of being neutral toward Christ. Verses 31-32 are about the impossibility of forgiveness for those who deliberately commit this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Verses 33-35 is about the impossibility of bad trees bringing forth good fruit. And verses 36-37 is about the impossibility of escaping judgment for the careless and evil things we say.

So it's a dark passage about how evil makes good things impossible—and those twin threads of *evil* and *impossibility* are woven through every verse.

But *I* think the most shocking verse of all is verse 30—and it's the one verse in that short section that seems most tailor-made for Judas. It certainly *ought* to have jolted Judas and got him paying attention.

It's shocking when we read it, because it seems at first glance to be contradictory to the spirit Christ usually encouraged in His followers. Remember that instance in Luke 9 where the apostle John reported that they had encountered a man whom they didn't know? The man was casting out demons in Jesus' name. And John tried to make him cut it out. The apostle John told Jesus, "**We tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.**"

Luke 9:50: "**But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.'**" In that case, he was stressing the amazing spiritual unity that binds true

Christians together. He was teaching his true disciples that we are not to magnify our differences or form little parties that exclude one another. His focus in Luke 9 is on how we are to treat fellow believers, and especially fellow ministers of Christ. *Notice: the guy John described was doing valid ministry in Jesus' name, and the only thing the disciples had against him was that he was not a member of their group.* Don't do that, Jesus said. If he comes in the name of Christ and does not oppose any cardinal doctrine of Christ, then he is on our side. Treat him like the brother he is. Within the scope of Christ's kingdom, anyone who is not against us is on our side, and we should not treat them as enemies or competitors.

But here in Matthew 12, the point is completely different. *Here* the context is the warfare between Christ's kingdom and the forces of evil. In *that* conflict, Jesus says, there can be no neutrality.

See: In the Luke 9 passage, the point is that within the kingdom of Christ, and in the realm where people are doing the work of Christ, there can be no enmity. Here in Matthew 12, the point is that in the realm of conflict between good and evil, there can be no neutrality.

This is a vital lesson. It's important, of course, to those who want to follow Jesus at a distance perpetually and never make any real commitment to Him. You can't do that. That's just a form of lingering unbelief—a *refusal* to obey, under the

pretense that you really don't *oppose* Christ—you're just not prepared to submit to him at the moment. That's evil. Don't fool yourself into thinking that's an admirable form of open-mindedness. *It isn't.* It's wicked. That's Jesus' point here. If you are on the fence, it is urgent that you get off. Because if you are not obedient to Christ, then you're being disobedient to Him. If you haven't yielded to His lordship, then you are against Him.

Which is to say, if you are not a true believer who loves Christ with genuine faith—if you are one of those who has put salvation off while you merely pretend to be a friend of Christ's, but you are not really *with* Him—then you are against Him. In other words, you are his enemy. You have *made yourself* His enemy by refusing to follow Him when He called you. And if you think you're being friendly to Him while you're really refusing to surrender to Him—you are self-deceived, and your soul is in mortal danger. That's what Jesus was saying here, and it is an earnest and urgent plea every casual Christian needs to heed. Judas *didn't* heed it, and it cost him his soul.

Incidentally, this lesson is important to *believers*, too, especially in the context of our witnessing to others. Lots of people today think the way to reach out to unbelievers is to find common ground with them, and then from that neutral position, try to win them to Christ in a totally positive and completely affirming way. You look for good things in their

worldview you can validate and agree with, and you systematically draw them closer to where you are standing on neutral turf.

The problem with that is that in the first place, there is no neutral ground. the more you try to affirm the worldview of an unbeliever, the more you actually make the work of evangelism more difficult. In the second place, if you're standing on ground that you *think* is neutral, trying to persuade the unbeliever to move your direction, you're never going to get them any further than that so-called neutral position you have assumed.

And the big problem with that is the so-called neutral ground is not neutral at all. If you're not *with* Christ, you are *against* Him, and the moment you contextualize your message so that you are standing in a place that seems neutral, you have taken a stance against Christ, whether that is what you intended to do or not. Christ tolerates no neutrality in the eternal conflict between His kingdom and the prince of this world. If you are not with Him you are against him.

Now, try to see that through the eyes of someone like Judas, who no doubt thought of himself as more or less neutral. If anything, he probably thought he was *sympathetic* to Christ at this point, but he was still holding off making a full commitment to Christ until he saw whether it was going

to be worth it to follow Christ. This statement should have absolutely rocked his worldview.

It doesn't seem to have had that effect, and I think I know why. Judas, like so many half-hearted disciples, was too busy maintaining his hypocritical veneer. So Jesus has a second lesson for him and for all lukewarm, not-quite believers. First was that neutrality is impossible. Now second—

## 2. HYPOCRISY IS INFERNAL

Hypocrisy is the most demonic of sins. It's deceptive by definition, so it *looks* good. And the hypocrite—if he's a good one—can manage to fool lots of people for a long time. But there's nothing more satanic, is there? Because Satan does that very thing. Second Corinthians 11:14-15, Paul writes: **"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. [And then he adds this:] Their end will correspond to their deeds."**

That is precisely what Jesus says here. Verses 33-37:

**Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.**

**34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**

**35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.**

**36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,**

**37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.**

Now this is a very difficult passage, and it really deserves a message or two of its own. Perhaps someday we can do that. But for this morning, all I really have time to do this morning is summarize the point.

This is an extension of a point Jesus made at the very end of His Sermon on the Mount. That whole sermon was a denunciation of the Pharisees and their phony spirituality, and in the closing lines, Matthew 7:17-18, Jesus said this: **"Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."**

That's simple and obvious. And the point was clear: you can tell a tree by its fruits. Religious hypocrisy is nothing more than an attempt to make rotten fruit look good. You can sometimes *temporarily* disguise bad fruit. Green grocers have ways of making fruit look better than it is, I think. But if you have ever bit into one of those perfect-looking red apples and it turned out to be going rotten from the inside

out, you know it right away. (That's why I cut my apples up before biting into them these days.)

Well, the point—especially at the end of the Sermon on the Mount—was that the Pharisees' teaching is rotten fruit, and all their ritual behaviors couldn't disguise that. What came out of their *mouths* was corrupt.

Here in Matthew 12, on the heels of this incident where some Pharisees committed the ultimate blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the point was likewise clear. They were still producing rotten fruit, and the reason for that is that they themselves were bad to the core, and a bad tree can't bear good fruit.

So verse 33: "**Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad.**"

Now, obviously a bad tree has no way of making *itself* good. This was not a command for these bad trees to reform themselves. Self-reform is the *last* thing a hypocrite needs. That would be a prescription for deeper hypocrisy. The hypocrite needs first of all to admit that he is sinful and spiritually bankrupt and helpless to make himself good. He *doesn't* need to apply himself even more to works-righteousness—which is exactly what all efforts at self-reform invariably become.

In fact, this statement in verse 33 might actually be an ironic statement about the impossibility of self-reform. Or it could be understood as a simple statement underscoring the

fact that unless a sinners' heart is *transformed*, his life can never be *reformed*. (Both of those are true and possible interpretations.) But in this context, what seems to make most sense to me is that Jesus was simply urging these hypocrites to confess the truth of the evil-tree/evil-fruit connection. Here they were, evil in their hearts, but desperately wanting people to think they were *good*. And meanwhile, Jesus never did anything other than good—even casting out demons and healing incurable disease and blindness. But the Pharisees so desperately wanted people to think He was *bad* that they committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

So the sense of this saying is—"either affirm that both tree and fruit are good, or admit that both tree and fruit are evil."

Now remember that Jesus had already condemned the Pharisees and declared their sin unforgivable—so the point he is making here is mainly for the benefit of bystanders—one of whom was Judas, who needed to face his own heart and confess his own hypocrisy and be warned that because his heart was evil, the fruit of it would be bad as well. He couldn't continue to pretend allegiance to Christ and yet hold back from truly trusting Christ in his heart. His bad heart was incompatible with good works—and the more he tried to keep up the pretense of good, the more like Satan he became, because hypocrisy is infernal. He was in effect opening his

heart to the devil, and the devil was about to come in and make a home there.

That's the point of the illustration at the end of Matthew 12, and it's also point three in this plea to Judas and all other half-hearted disciples. Point one: neutrality is impossible. Point 2: Hypocrisy is infernal. Now point three, as quickly as we can cover it—

### 3. APOSTASY IS INEVITABLE

Pretend to be a follower of Christ while you delay surrendering to His lordship, and you are merely hardening your own heart. Do that long enough, and it is inevitable that you will fall away or sin away every advantage you have neglected, so that in the end there will be no hope for you.

That's the point of the illustration in verses 43-45:

**When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.**

**44 Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.**

**45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first.**

Keep your heart empty, especially after you have seen and understood the gospel, and eventually it will become the

habitation of demons. That is precisely what happened to Judas. Satan entered his heart and destroyed him by getting him to commit the most evil deed ever carried out by a single individual.

I seriously doubt that was Judas's plan from the start. I think at the beginning, and perhaps even throughout most of Jesus' earthly ministry, Judas was merely trying to be *neutral*. He might have even thought (like a lot of people do) that one day he would repent and become a true disciple. But he put it off until it was impossible. At that point, Judas's sin became unforgivable, too.

And here's the dominant lesson in all of this: all sin is unforgivable if it's not repented of. Even the smallest sin can send you to hell if you cling to that sin and refuse Christ. Revelation 21:8, describing the end of the wicked, says, "**the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.**" Everyone always notices how that verse condemns murderers and sorcerers and sexually immoral people. But don't miss the fact that it *starts* with "**the cowardly [and] the faithless**"—people whose greatest sin was that they kept Christ at arm's length and pretended to be neutral.

Again: *all* sin is unforgivable while a person remains unrepentant. So here's my advice to those struggling with

fear about whether they might have committed an unpardonable sin: instead of worrying about *that*, repent of the sins you know and love and devote your private life to.

From the start of our study of the unpardonable sin, I have said several times that there seems to be a correlation between the blasphemy uttered against Christ by these Pharisees and the warnings in Hebrews 6 and 10. Hebrews 6 cautions people who have seen the truth about Christ, tasted the benefits of the gospel, and even been under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit—people who have enjoyed all those benefits and come to a full knowledge of the truth but have never embraced Christ by faith and thus entered into rest from their own works—the passage warns them that if they then fall away or turn away from Christ, they are abandoning any possibility of salvation in the future.

Listen to Hebrews 6:4-6: **"It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."** Hebrews 10:27-28 likewise says, **"If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries."**

If you hear this message and you are someone who knows the truth about Christ and *understands* the way of salvation—especially if you have maintained the pretense of being a Christian—but in your own private heart you have kept your distance from Christ, whether out of fear, a love for your sin, or just plain spiritual lethargy, then you may indeed be on the verge of a sin that is unforgivable—and you need to turn to him in faith today, beg His forgiveness, and plead for a new heart. That's the only way you can know for sure that you are not guilty of unforgivable sin.

The issue is really just that cut and dried: John 3:18:  
**"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already."**