

The Blasphemy Against the Spirit

Matthew 12:31-32

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We are returning this morning to Matthew 12, where Jesus gives that chilling warning about the unpardonable sin. Specifically, Matthew 12:31-32: **"Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."**

That is a troubling passage. Lots of people are confused and confounded by it. I know that because people ask questions about it all the time. Some people simply want to know how to explain it, but there are also a lot of people (Christians and non-Christians alike) who worry that they might have committed a sin that is unforgivable. I've known people (some in the church, some outside the church) who are practically paralyzed with fear that they are guilty of some sin that can never be forgiven.

Now, let's face it: anyone who takes Jesus' words seriously *should* be troubled by a warning as dire as this. If you can blow a passage like this off as nothing to be concerned about, I'd be more worried about your soul than I am about the guy who feels the burden of guilt and knows there's no easy remedy for his sin.

Still, if you confess Christ as Lord and trust in Him as Savior—if you *understand the high price He paid to atone for your sin*—you should not be perpetually stymied with the fear that your sin is greater than His grace. There's especially no reason for a Christian to have to entertain relentlessly nagging anxiety about whether they can find forgiveness. And yet we know some Christians do struggle with such fears, because the issue comes up all the time in the counseling room, in our Bible studies, in Q&A sessions, and in private conversations. So that's why I wanted to take three sessions to look at this passage in depth.

Even if you personally aren't tortured by fear when you encounter this passage, I want to try to equip you to help those who *do* grapple with those fears. Because if you have meaningful spiritual relationships with people—or if you do much evangelism, you will be asked questions about this passage.

Here's a fact that may surprise you: Lots of people who have never darkened the door of a church know this text is in the Bible and secretly worry about it. When I used to do street evangelism in Chicago during my student years, people brought up this question all the time. In all likelihood, some of your friends and neighbors and people you do business with are privately wracked with fear that they might have sinned past the point of no return. I know from firsthand experience that there are a lot of people in the

secular world who may never give any indication that they think about God, but nevertheless, their own consciences are telling them that they may already have sinned so badly that anything they ever tried to do good would never make up for the sin.

That's true, by the way: Nothing you do that's good will ever make up for your sin. It's true about *all* of us, of course: nothing good we can do could ever atone for the sins we have already committed. That's a vital part of the gospel message.

Of course, the gospel is *good news* because it explains how our sins can be forgiven anyway—not by any penance or self-redemption we do for ourselves, but completely and only because of the atoning work of Christ.

Still, some people imagine that some sin they have committed is too big or too bad for even Christ to wash away. They think God has given up on them. Therefore, *they* have given up on God—in the sense that they have put Him out of their thoughts; they have seared their consciences, and they have convinced themselves that they have no further duty to God. Of course that is a Satanic lie, and that's the kind of thoughtless spiritual apathy that keeps people in bondage to their sin.

Even those who aren't merely apathetic sometimes use this text as a pretext for not coming to Christ for forgiveness. While I was in the process of preparing this message, I got a

letter from a man who said he has been wrestling for more than a decade with the question of whether his sin is unforgivable, and he said at the end of the process, "All I have now is despair, terror, my pile of unimaginable sin, and evil." We get letters like that all the time at Grace to You.

This guy once professed to be a believer, but he never actually lived like a believer. Then someone showed him Hebrews 10:26-27, which 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."** And a parallel passage, Hebrews 6:4-6, says, **"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, [it is impossible] 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."**

So this guy is fearful. I have spoken to him several times, and each time he raises the question of whether those warnings apply to his case. Has he sinned away the possibility of saving grace? How can he know for sure one way or another? Because if you take the plain, simple straightforward meaning of the words of Hebrews 10, he thinks he is guilty as charged. He sinned *deliberately* after

receiving the knowledge of the truth. And now he is wracked with doubts about whether his sin can ever be forgiven. He's become obsessed with the subject.

So this morning, I want to sweep all those questions together and take a second look at Matthew 12:31-32 and its broader context. Last time we considered the question of what was the nature of the sin Jesus described as unpardonable. This time let's consider why Jesus gave these words about unpardonable sin in this particular context. We'll talk about what this admonition meant to those who heard Him, and we'll consider some very specific questions about how the matter of unpardonable sin is relevant to you and to me.

Matthew 12:31-32. I already read the text, and I hope you have your Bibles open to it. Remember that when Jesus spoke these words of warning, He was responding to a group of Pharisees who accused Him of using the power of Satan to cast out demons. They didn't make such a ridiculous allegation because they actually *believed* it. This wasn't a sin of ignorance or misunderstanding on their part. They didn't really believe He was working in Satan's power; they were just desperate to discredit Jesus any way they could, no matter what He did.

In fact, it appears from John 11 that they knew full well that He was the legitimate Messiah of Israel, because they simply could not deny all the signs and wonders he did.

Listen to John 11:47-48: "**the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.'**" So attributing the miracles of Jesus to Satan was a desperate, last-gasp attempt to defame and disparage Him—*not* because they didn't believe He was who He claimed to be, but because He simply wasn't the kind of Messiah they wanted, and especially because He represented a major threat to their political power. They wanted a messiah who would defeat their enemies, not someone like Jesus, who kept pointing out where *they* were wrong. They wanted a messiah who would do what they said, not a Lord whom they had to submit to. So they rejected Jesus and tried their best to discredit Him even though they had no legitimate reason whatsoever to doubt Him or challenge Him.

In other words, the blasphemy they uttered was deliberate, premeditated, and done with their eyes wide open. Jesus called it "**the blasphemy against the [Holy] Spirit**"—as if it were the consummate, climactic apogee of all blasphemies. And it was, because Jesus did His miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit, and by saying He was working in Satan's power, they were in fact calling the Holy Spirit "**Beelzebul, the prince of demons.**"

So keep this in mind: That was the precise sin that prompted Jesus to issue these famous words about the unpardonable sin. It was a direct and personal onslaught against Christ (and even more so against the Holy Spirit) in the face of overwhelming, irrefutable evidence for the truth of His claims. It was a deliberate, public, verbal act of blasphemy by men who had looked Jesus in the eyes, seen the truth, and had sufficient evidence for believing in Him—but they were determined at all costs to destroy Him anyway.

And last time we looked at this passage, we observed three singular characteristics of the unpardonable sin: One, *it is extraordinary, not common*. Two, *it is deliberate, not accidental*. And three: *it is a sin of the heart, not merely of the lips*.

Last time I also pointed out something I want to stress again this week: Even this grim-sounding section of Scripture about one unpardonable sin is accompanied by a vast promise of forgiveness that covers every conceivable kind of sin and every imaginable degree of sin anyone might ever repent of. Verse 31: "**every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people.**"

That, to me is the most remarkable aspect of what Jesus was saying in this passage. It would not be surprising for an omnipotent God who is perfectly Holy and righteous to declare *every* kind of deliberate sin and thoughtless

blasphemy unforgivable. If we truly understood even a fraction of the diabolical evil that is inherent in even the smallest of our transgressions, we would marvel that a righteous God would ever be willing to forgive *any* sin.

So *that's* really the most remarkable aspect of Jesus' statement: He expressly states that (except for one very specific kind of blasphemy) every type and every degree of evil we have ever committed is forgivable, redeemable, and capable of being fully covered by God's grace and washed whiter than snow by His redemptive work.

Psalm 136:1 in the KJV says "**The LORD is good: [and] his mercy endureth forever.**" The word "mercy" is translated "**steadfast love**" in the ESV and "**lovingkindness**" in the New American Standard. The Hebrew word includes the ideas of goodness, lovingkindness, pity, and mercy. It includes all those ideas. But the context here in Psalm 136 does seem to put the stress on God's tenderhearted compassion for people who don't deserve it. So "mercy" is certainly at the heart of the idea.

That four-word phrase ("**his mercy endureth forever**") appears 41 times in the King James version of the Bible. It is one of the most commonly-used statements about God anywhere in Scripture. It appears 26 times in Psalm 136 alone. It's the refrain of that psalm—appearing once in each verse of the text. God's mercies are inexhaustible, and Scripture stresses this over and over again. His grace is

greater than all our sin. **"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning"** (Lamentations 3:22-23). In the words of Psalm 86:15, **"God [is] full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth."** Micah 7:18 says **"[God] delights in mercy."** The kindness, compassion, grace, and forgiveness of God are infinite, inexhaustible, never-ending, new and fresh and every morning—and Scripture stresses that fact from beginning to end.

"Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people." That's an amazing promise, and it is Jesus' own starting point here. He reminds us that there's no sin so dark and evil that it cannot be washed by His blood and made as white and pure as the driven snow.

So it should be obvious that what makes the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable cannot be some deficiency in the magnitude or extent of God's mercy. Divine mercy is *infinite*. Scripture teaches that truth again and again: the grace of God is utterly inexhaustible—it never runs out and never fails. To say it another way, there is no evil so great or so monstrous that divine mercy could be utterly overwhelmed and extinguished by it. There's no evil that is bigger or more robust than God's benevolence.

But what makes this particular blasphemy unforgivable is a settled hardness in the heart of the sinner. It's not some

kind of inadequacy or insufficiency in the kindness and mercy of God. But *this* sin is beyond the pale of forgiveness because the person who commits this kind of sin has already received the full light of gospel truth; he *knows* it is true; he has seen the kindness and compassion of God in the bright light of abundant revealed truth—and yet he so utterly despises the grace and goodness of Christ that he turns away from Christ forever with the full knowledge of what he is doing. So it's more than a mere thoughtless rejection of Christ; it involves open and outright animosity against Him. It is a full and final renunciation of Christ that is so decisive, so deliberate, so brazenly blasphemous that it extinguishes all hope forever for the person who commits it.

In other words, this is such a cold-hearted, hate-filled, purposeful, irrevocable, and terminal act of reprobation that the person who commits a sin like this would never even think of having any kind of regret. The sin itself by definition entails such a deliberate and decisive hardening of one's own heart against the gospel (even *after* full proof of the gospel has already been seen, heard, and understood) that the person who commits such a sin would never again think of, dream of, or wish for repentance. That is what makes this sin unpardonable.

After all, no one's sin is ever pardoned apart from repentance and faith, so when someone spurns the Holy Spirit with this kind of finality and intentionality after

already being enlightened to the truth of the gospel, then naturally, all hope for that person is utterly extinguished.

So (to wrap up our review) this much is crystal-clear about the unpardonable sin: It's a deliberate sin. It's *not a sin of omission or neglect*, and not something you could commit accidentally, merely by a slip of the tongue or by blundering into it through some unexpected mishap. In fact, it is unforgivable *because* it seals forever the utter, self-determined hardness of the sinner's heart. It's not a sin anyone who commits it would ever even have second thoughts about.

Now, having said all that, let's acknowledge also that we still have a lot of questions about the unpardonable sin, and Jesus doesn't stop to answer them here. We're left with lots of hazy details, and several questions we'd *like* to raise whose answers are completely shrouded from us. For example, can we tell when someone has crossed that line? It would seem pointless to try to evangelize or even pray for someone who has committed this sin. One of the most difficult verses in the New Testament is 1 John 5:16, where the apostle writes, **"There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that [any]one should pray for that."** Why aren't we given an infallible test by which we can know whether someone has passed the point of no return or not? For that matter, why isn't Jesus' explanation

of the unforgivable sin more specific? "**The blasphemy against the [Holy] Spirit**" isn't a very precise description.

But still, this is *clearly* a very distinctive sin. As we saw last time we looked at this passage, the definite article is important here. It's "**THE blasphemy against the Spirit**"—not just any kind of careless remark invoking the Spirit's Name in vain, but one particular type of blasphemy against His Person and work—a blasphemy so horribly egregious as to be completely unpardonable. It's a sin that specifically desecrates Holy Spirit, in distinction from other kinds of blasphemy—even including every kind of blasphemy against the Son of God. Jesus *expressly* says that all those other sins are forgivable—however grotesque they might be. (*That's assuming, of course, that the blasphemer repents.*) Only this one uniquely personal, uniquely deliberate blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not forgivable, ever. Wouldn't you like to know the precise boundaries of that kind of blasphemy, the better to avoid it? But Jesus gives no further explanation about the specifics of this sin.

That's because the *particulars* of the sin are not what is most important here. Jesus made this statement in the context He did for a reason. It's not a statement about the sin per se; it's a statement about these Pharisees—the gross wickedness of their way of thinking, the extreme dangers of their singular brand of spiritual arrogance, the obscene folly of persisting in known sin, and (most of all) the appalling

enormity of the mortal peril that hangs like Damocles' sword over the head everyone who knows the truth about Christ and yet hesitates to embrace Him as Lord and Savior by faith.

It is probably significant that all three synoptic gospels mention the unpardonable sin. You'll find cross references to this passage in Mark 3:28-29 and Luke 12:10. The fact that the Holy Spirit preserved the record of Jesus' words about the unpardonable sin in three of the four gospels underscores its importance. Although Jesus addressed this rebuke to *the Pharisees*, He said these things in the presence of His disciples—for their benefit and for ours as well. So there's an important spiritual lesson for you here whether you are a believer, a blasphemer, or a fence-sitter.

For those obstinate *Pharisees*, rejecting Christ even after they knew the truth about Him, Jesus' words were a pronouncement of judgment. Jesus sealed their doom forever with these remarks.

For the *disciples*, Jesus' words were a solemn warning, calculated to provoke godly fear. The eleven faithful disciples were about to be sifted like wheat. Specifically, they were going to be tempted to abandon their faith in Christ and forsake their calling as His disciples. They needed to hear this warning and ponder the gravity of that kind of unfaithfulness.

And for *Judas* in particular, this was an admonition about the looming dangers of his hypocrisy and his hesitancy with regard to Christ. Judas was a classic hypocrite, and Jesus knew it. He pretended to be a close disciple of Christ, but he wasn't really even a believer at all. Judas *knew* it, too. So Jesus' response to the Pharisees' sin ought to have awakened a holy fear in his heart. He was well on the road to the same kind of deliberate self-hardening as the Pharisees, but at this point he had evidently not yet rejected Christ with complete finality the way the Pharisees already had. He was still sitting on the fence at this juncture, and Jesus was telling him he couldn't possibly stay there. Verse 30: "**Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.**"

Now, this morning, I want to look at our passage from those three perspectives. Because whoever you are, you fit roughly into one or the other of those three categories. You're either an undecided unbeliever like Judas was at this point, a true believer like the disciples (but still subject to temptation), or else you are a hardened unbeliever like these blaspheming Pharisees. I hope there is no one here this morning who has reached that level of unbelief and deliberate opposition to the Holy Spirit, but if we learn anything at all from this passage, it's that some people *do* go to irrational and utterly ungodly extremes in their rejection of Christ as Lord and Savior.

So let's consider each of these perspectives one at a time, starting with the Pharisees. First, notice that this passage is—

1. A JUDGMENT AGAINST THE PHARISEES

This whole episode represents a clear turning point in Jesus' interaction with the hostile Pharisees. With these words about the unpardonable sin, Jesus was in effect making a summary pronouncement of eternal judgment against some of the chief religious leaders of the Jewish nation.

This was a decisive moment for them. The One to whom all judgment has been committed pronounced His verdict against them, and in effect He declared that judgment irreversible. From this point on, their doom was sealed. The final sentence had already been read against them, and although the execution of that sentence will be delayed until the Great White Throne, nothing in earth or heaven—"**[n]either in this age [n]or in the age to come**"—can ever change or mitigate that judgment. They had sinned away their last opportunity for forgiveness.

Remember what had brought them to this point. Certain leading Pharisees had hounded and harassed Jesus throughout His ministry. They were seeking by all means to try to embarrass Him publicly. They repeatedly tried to confound Him with trick questions, discredit Him in the eyes of His followers, or otherwise show Him up. And all those

efforts had utterly failed, every time. Everything they did in opposition to Him only *established* His authority and confirmed His claims while causing public disgrace for them. But they only became more determined in their opposition, until their fury finally boiled over.

The blasphemy that Jesus said was unforgivable was the culmination of their long, relentless campaign of opposition to Jesus. It's *possible* to oppose Christ and push Him away, and even hate Him and yet still be drawn by the Holy Spirit, won over by the gospel, and forgiven—even after blaspheming Christ. That is what Jesus Himself means when he says in verse 32 that it's possible to "**[speak] a word against the Son of Man [and yet] be forgiven.**" That is precisely what happened to the apostle Paul. It's happened to countless people who have become convicted of the truth of the gospel and the claims of Christ after they have already opposed Him. The moment they repent, all of that is instantly forgiven.

But with these Pharisees what you have is the exact *opposite* phenomenon. They become convinced that Jesus is for real; they know in their hearts that His claims are true; they see the light—and that only makes them more bold in their determination to destroy him and discredit him in the eyes of other people, by whatever means they can. This was not a sudden shift in their posture with regard to Christ. This was not an accidental blasphemy that inadvertently slipped

from unguarded lips. This was not merely a one-time infraction that Jesus arbitrarily judged more harshly than He judged other people's wrongdoing. This was the culmination and the termination point of their opposition to Him. From this point on their hatred for Jesus was not rooted in mere ignorance; because in order to persist in this level of antagonism against Jesus, they had to spurn the Holy Spirit's enlightenment. And in giving voice to willful hatred of Him, they thereby committed the consummate act of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Matthew takes pains to stress that this didn't just come out of nowhere. It happened after a series of key incidents recorded in Matthew 12 where Jesus demonstrated that He was Lord even over the Sabbath. He had just healed a man's incurable physical defect, and instead of rejoicing with the man who was healed and praising God that they were privileged to witness such an undeniable miracle, Matthew 12:14 says, **"The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."** Their opposition against Jesus had reached the point where they were even willing to plot murder. And that, of course, was the seed of the conspiracy that ultimately put Jesus on the cross.

So don't underestimate the gross wickedness that was behind their hatred of Jesus. It wasn't merely unbelief. In fact, they did not dispute whether the miracle actually occurred. It was undeniable.

Someone might be thinking, *Yeah, but that was a much more gullible age than ours. People were especially susceptible to claims of miracles. That culture was not prone to doubt supernatural claims, and that's why the Pharisees didn't suggest that Jesus was merely performing sleight-of-hand tricks.* That ignores the truth about first-century Judaism. Check the biblical record and you'll see that there had been no verifiable miracle for several centuries before Jesus came. According to John 10:47, even John the Baptist (whom Jesus said was greater than anyone before him) never did a single miracle. Miracle-claims were by no means common, and if the Pharisees had wanted to discredit Jesus, the easiest thing in the world to do would have been to expose Him as a mere trickster. You can bet they would have done that if it were possible. But when so many people *knew* people who had been born blind and had been given their sight by Jesus, it was a little hard to write that off as a parlor trick. Here (in Matthew 12:22) was a man both blind and mute and demon-possessed—and Jesus instantly made him physically and spiritually whole. Before that (verses 10-12) it was a man with a withered arm—and the Greek word suggests that his hand was severely and visibly deformed—like a wilted, dried-up leaf. Suddenly, before everyone's eyes, (v. 13) his hand was made to be as healthy as the other one.

There was absolutely no point in questioning the reality of the miracles. They were too public and too impossible to fake. So these desperate, hate-filled Pharisees instead accused Jesus of using Satan's power to work mighty wonders. And when they said that, they deliberately blasphemed the Holy Spirit, because He was the one who empowered Jesus' miracles. Luke 11:20—Jesus said, "**it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons.**" In Luke 4:14, at the very starting point of Jesus' public ministry, Scripture tells us that He came "**in the power of the Spirit.**" To say Jesus did miracles by Satan's power was tantamount to calling the Holy Spirit the prince of demons. And since they had already hardened their hearts against everything they knew to be true about Jesus, this was a sin with no remedy.

Thus Jesus' words to them should not be seen as a warning, but as a pronouncement of doom. It was a declaration of judgment. The Pharisees' self-hardening and deliberate unbelief had reached its culmination in this stunning expression of blasphemy. They had seen every truth the Holy Spirit could possibly show them. They knew the full truth about Christ. They had seen Him exercise His power; they had witnessed the beauty of His goodness up close and in person—and it had only stirred them to a deeper hatred of Him. They had rejected the only remedy for their hardness of heart and now with this shocking expression of blasphemy, they sealed their rejection forever.

Such a sin is unforgivable because it is an expression of full and final impenitence. Once again: it's a sin no one ever could or would repent of. The language of Mark 3:29 makes this clear: "**whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit . . . is guilty of an eternal sin**" That means the sin itself is by definition never-ending, everlasting—it goes on forever and ever. That is the very nature of it, and that is why it is unforgivable. These men could not and would not ever *have* forgiveness—because they had so deliberately fixed their opposition to Christ that they would *never* bow to receive a pardon from *someone* they were so determined to hate. They had rejected every ray of light and every pang of conscience in their blind determination to discredit Christ, and from now on—starting on that very Sabbath—they would reap the bitter consequences of their own self-will.

Therefore Jesus pronounced their doom, and He did it publicly, emphatically, and with irreversible finality. He was not pleading with them or offering them a second chance. His goal was not to instruct them or admonish them, or even solicit their repentance. He was finished with them, and this was his formal pronouncement of *God's* verdict against them.

That becomes obvious in the way he begins to speak to them after this. In Matthew 12:34 He says, "**You brood of vipers!**" and in verse 39 he calls them "**An evil and adulterous generation.**" That's not merely name-calling. He is addressing them as sons of Satan, condemned liars—irreversible

reprobates. Because that is exactly what they now were: damned fools. He was simply pronouncing their judgment.

They didn't seem to get it, though, and they asked Him for another sign in verse 38. This is merely a taunting challenge from the same group who had already judged his miracles satanic. Of course, Jesus refused to perform for them. He promised the sign of the prophet Jonah (v. 39-40—of course, he is talking about his resurrection), and then He again declares their doom in even more emphatic terms (verses 41-42). This is a prophecy about the day of judgment: **"The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."**

And then the whole encounter closes with an insight into the dark side of the spirit world that underscores the futility of moral reform without true faith. That, of course, was the whole problem with the Pharisees; they were clean and swept on the inside, but their hearts were the habitation of demons. So the closing line of the conversation sums up Jesus' whole message to them: (v. 45) **"The last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."**

Not very uplifting is it? Still, I'm convinced there is a gracious and benevolent reason Jesus pronounced all that doom and gloom in public. And this (I believe) is also the chief reason this episode is recorded for *our* benefit in all three synoptic gospels: It is an urgent warning, a sober admonition, and a tender plea to everyone other than the Pharisees who were already guilty of that unforgivable blasphemy.

And here's point two. (Point 1: this was a judgment against the Pharisees.) Point 2, it was—

2. A WARNING FOR THE DISCIPLES

I'm convinced this episode is given so much prominence in the gospels because it is still important today. It was important for the disciples to hear this, and it is important for you and me as well.

Now, I've said it's a warning, and you might be wondering why. *Why would he warn His disciples about the dangers of an unpardonable sin? Most if not all of them (except for Judas) were already believers by this point.* No authentic believer can or would ever do anything that would cost them the loss of their salvation. Jesus Himself said, "**whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has [already] passed from death to life.**"

So if it's impossible for a genuine believer to come into judgment, then it's also (by definition) impossible for a true Christian to commit the unpardonable sin. We know that simply from what we know about the nature of the unpardonable sin.

So how is this a warning to the disciples? Well, they were about to be sifted like wheat. Remember in Luke 22, during the Last Supper, when Jesus was warning the disciples that He was about to be betrayed by one of them? The mood was very somber, and Jesus turned to Peter and He said (Luke 22:31): "**Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat.**" The Greek pronoun ("you") in that verse is plural. Satan was going to sift them *all* like wheat. Just before the crucifixion, all of them would be subjected to a Satanic trial that would stress their faith to the maximum. Jesus went on in verse 32 to say to Peter, "**but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.**" And there he was speaking to Peter particularly (probably saying this quietly, out of earshot of the other eleven)—so he uses a singular pronoun. "*I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith will remain intact.*" This was a private reassurance to Peter that even though he was about to go through the darkest trial of his life, Christ was praying for him, and God would sustain him, so that even though his resolve would fail and his courage would melt, his faith would remain intact. And it did.

I have no doubt that one of the factors that kept Peter's faith intact was the cumulative weight of everything Peter had ever heard from Jesus' own lips about the deadly dangers of unbelief—including a healthy, holy fear of the kind of blasphemy that Jesus said could ever be forgiven.

I'm sure *you* have noticed that Scripture is peppered with warnings addressed to groups of Christians about the danger of falling away, the danger of losing ground spiritually, and other dangers associated with hypocrisy. And if your faith is healthy, I'm sure you think about those warnings—and think *seriously* about them. Second John 8, for example. The apostle writes: "**Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward.**" In those verses I read earlier, Hebrews 6 talks about the dangers of falling away, and Hebrews 10 warns about sinning after we have received knowledge of the truth. Bible teachers and commentators have debated for years about whether those verses suggest that Christians can in fact lose their salvation. We don't believe that's what those texts teach, of course.

But one fact is beyond debate, and it's this: those warnings were all *addressed* to people who professed to be Christians.

Now let me say this clearly, even though we don't have time this morning to do a full exegesis on Hebrews 6 and 10. (We'll come back and look at them in another message, Lord willing.) But I'll tell you emphatically that those passages do

not nullify the promise of John 5:24: Genuine believers have passed from death unto life and will never come into condemnation. Salvation is forever. Eternal life is our present possession, and it is (by definition) permanent and everlasting. You can't lose it, because it wouldn't be eternal life at all if you could. And *justification* would mean nothing, either, if it could eventually be overturned by a future guilty verdict. *Grace* would mean very little as well, if something I do could nullify what Christ has already done for me.

And we've been over this subject many times, so for now, let me just reiterate that I don't believe it's possible for a genuine Christian to lose his or her salvation. Therefore, it's also impossible for any genuine believer to commit the unpardonable sin.

So what are all these warnings in Scripture about? Let me give you two basic reasons for that; First of all, they are warnings to people who have professed to believe but aren't true believers yet. (Let's keep that on the back burner and we'll take it up when we get to point three.)

But second, and more to the point here, those warnings are promptings that the Holy Spirit uses to keep true believers faithful. Warnings such as this encourage us to examine ourselves, to see whether we are truly in the faith. They provoke godly fear. They remind us of the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

If you are truly in Christ, you are eternally secure in Him. In fact, we sometimes refer to this truth as the doctrine of *eternal security*. But the classic name for the doctrine is *the perseverance of the saints*. And I like that expression a little better than "eternal security," because it gets more to the heart of the truth. The idea is not that if you are saved, you are OK no matter what you do, but that if you are truly saved, you will see the fruit of salvation in how you live. If your faith is real, you *won't* fall away. But security isn't automatic or mechanical, irrespective of what we do. Those whose faith is real are secure because God keeps them faithful. We "**are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation**" (1 Peter 1:5). That's the King James Version again. The English Standard Version says, "**By God's power[, believers] are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.**" Same idea. God is guarding and keeping our faith alive. He uses means to keep us faithful. Warnings such as these are a vital part of the means He uses to do that.

Now, there are people who *do* fall away. Sometimes people who we think are the best of saints fall away, and abandon the faith. And what that actually proves is that they were never genuinely saved to begin with. They weren't true believers at all. "**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" (1 John 2:19).

I've had a few friends over the years who I *thought* were solid believers—people who seemed to understand Scripture well and have a solid grasp of doctrine—who have hugely disappointed me and dishonored Christ by falling away and turning against Him.

Judas was like that. There's not a hint anywhere in the gospels that any of the disciples ever thought he was a phony. They trusted him so much they made him their treasurer. And even when Jesus told them that one of the Twelve would betray Him, every one of them suspected *themselves* before they suspected Judas, according to Matthew 26:22.

But Judas was a phony, and that is why I believe Jesus' words about the unpardonable sin were chiefly for *his* benefit.

Point 1: this was a judgment against the Pharisees. Point 2: it was a warning for the disciples. And now point 3: it was—

3. A PLEA TO JUDAS

Now I'm going to do something I never do. I almost always finish my outline, even if it means going overtime. But this morning I'm going to stop there and pick it up next week. That will enable us to close a lot of dangling threads. First of all, years ago, when I first began teaching in GraceLife, I did a series on the bad boys of the Bible, but I never did a message on Judas, who was the baddest bad-boy of all.

Second, as I've said, I believe this section on the unpardonable sin was chiefly for Judas's benefit, and for the benefit of all the fence-sitters and phonies like him. So I don't want to cut this study short.

And third, There is so much to say about false professions of faith and phony Christians in the New Testament that it would be a shame to cut this third point short. So I'm going to leave it there for this week and ask you to hold this thought in your mind all week, and come back next week prepared to do some serious self-examination.

OK? Bear with me for a week, and we'll come back and pick it up right here next week, Lord willing.