

What is the Unforgivable Sin?

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This article is presented to provide a clear understanding of the sin that cannot be forgiven?

“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.”

Matthew 12:31

TO UNDERSTAND THE SO-CALLED “UNFORGIVABLE SIN,” we must read about it within the surrounding context. In Matthew 12, Jesus healed a demonized blind mute (v.22). The Pharisees responded by saying, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (v.24). Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand” (v.25).

Jesus’ response established a principle which frames the rest of the passage and helps us to understand what He later meant when He spoke of a sin that would not be forgiven. When a kingdom (or any entity for that matter) divides and turns against itself, it will inevitably fall. It cannot stand. As an example, Jesus said, “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?” (v.26).

Jesus went on to tell these Pharisees, “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (v.28). Here Jesus equated the Spirit of God with the kingdom of God. In other words, if the Spirit of God should somehow be divided against itself, it could not continue to function. It could not stand. Of course, we know that this is not possible, since God is indivisibly one.

Jesus then posed this question, “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house” (v.29). The Spirit was the one who had bound the power of Satan (the strong man) and plundered his abode (which was the blind mute). Certainly Satan would not bind himself. Jesus then concluded, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad” (v.30). In other words, He was telling these men that their hostile and adversarial accusation against Him

and the work of the Spirit was revealing whose team they were on.

Jesus then said, “Therefore I say to you....” The fact that Jesus began with the word “therefore” means that what He was about to say was predicated on what He had just stated. That is, He was about to draw a conclusion. And His conclusion was this: “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come” (vv.31-32).

To fail to recognize Jesus as the manifestation of God in the flesh (the Son of Man) can be overcome. Likewise today, to fail to discern the Lord’s body (the Church) can also be overcome. But to fail to recognize the manifestation of the Spirit in miraculous healing and to then speak against it by calling it satanic power is problematic. Jesus did not say that He was unwilling to forgive such an offense; He simply stated that such an offense “will not be forgiven.” This is an important distinction. The issue is not whether or not God would be willing to forgive this sin; it is whether or not a person committing this sin can ever come to a place of repentance. After all, how can someone be forgiven when he has rejected the only source of forgiveness and attributed satanic origins to it?

A related passage is Hebrews 6:4-6. Here the author states that “it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” The Scriptures tell us that God grants repentance to man; it is not something man can do on his own (Acts 5:31; Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). So if a man rejects the only source of repentance by crucifying the source to himself, then from where can this man obtain repentance? It is not that he could not theoretically repent and be forgiven; it is that he cannot be rejecting the work of the Savior and at the same time be saved by Him.

Another related passage is 1 John 5:16 where the apostle writes, “If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.” The sin that leads to death is clearly the unconfessed sin, the unacknowledged sin (see 1 John 1:9-10). There is never repentance for any sin that is not acknowledged as sin. Paul wrote that he received mercy because he acted “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Timothy 1:13). But when a man knowingly opposes the very source of repentance, forgiveness, and salvation, he has lost all hope. As the author of Hebrews concluded, “For if we sin

willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

To speak of a sin that “will not be forgiven” is not the same as speaking of a sin that God will not forgive. The Bible says that the blood of Jesus is sufficient for washing away all sin, regardless of the severity. It says that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But when a person knowingly rejects and denies the only One who can grant repentance and forgiveness of sins, that person has entered a spiritual place from which there is no escape and which leads inexorably to eternal judgment.

In His dialogue with the Pharisees, Jesus concluded by saying, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:33-34). In this context, the tree represents the heart and the fruit the words of the mouth. Jesus was explaining to us that when a man’s words are evil, this is an indication that his heart is evil as well. In Mark’s version of this encounter, the writer explained that the Pharisees had blasphemed the Holy Spirit “because they said, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (Mark 3:30). These evil words betrayed their evil hearts. This is why the Bible says that upon hearing their accusation, Jesus, “knowing their thoughts,” began His response. He heard their spoken words, but He also discerned the thoughts and intents of their hearts.

Jesus went on to say, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (v.35). Again, the condition of the words betray the condition of the heart. Therefore Jesus culminated His teaching by saying, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (vv.36-37).

Our words are very significant. We do well to guard our tongue. David wrote, “I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle” (Psalms 39:1). He also prayed, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer” (Psalms 19:14).

Those who are concerned that they have committed the unforgivable sin generally have not. If they had, they would tend not to be concerned about it. Their pride and evil heart would have deceived them into thinking that they were perfectly fine and had no need of repentance.

Note to the reader:

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