

The Unforgivable Sin

Matthew 12:30-32

By Scott Huckaby

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What do you think of rule changes in the middle of the game?

They are not fair and are a source of insecurity.

What is the value of rules?

They help us understand the boundaries and provide guidelines to help us be successful.

What kind of rules do we have as followers of Christ?

- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
- Salvation is by faith through grace.
- You reap what you sow.
- You cannot out-sin the grace of God

Let's take a look at a passage where Jesus throws cold water on the concept of unlimited grace...

Matthew 12:30-32

³⁰ "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. ³¹ And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Is this a rule-changer? Did Jesus just say there is a sin we can commit that will never be forgiven?

Yes, He did: the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit

Before we dive deep into this passage, let's take a look at the context here to see what prompted Jesus to bring up the unforgivable sin:

- Jesus had just healed a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus went out of His way to heal on the Sabbath knowing that it would tweak the legalist Pharisees and this led to the following interaction with them...

Matthew 12:22-29

²² 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. ²³ All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

²⁵ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶ If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷ And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁸ But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

²⁹ 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.

What had the demon done to the man Jesus healed?

He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw: The demon had caused the man to be both blind and mute. This shows that physical afflictions can be the result of demonic possession.

- Jesus displayed His complete power and authority over demons, casting out demonic powers that the traditions of the day considered impossible.

How did the witnesses to this healing react?

Could this be the Son of David: The crowds reacted with Messianic expectation because this was the type of miracles they would expect from the Messiah:

Isaiah 35:5-6 – *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing.*

However, the religious leaders responded by attributing Jesus' power to the prince of demons (*This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebul*).

- The Pharisees' accusation amounts to a charge of sorcery, one which continued to be leveled against Jesus even after He was gone.

Who was Beelzebub?

Beelzebub is the Greek form of the name Baal-zebul, a pagan Philistine god worshiped in the ancient Philistine city of Ekron during the Old Testament times. It is a term signifying “the lord of flies” (2 Kings 1:2).

- Archaeological excavations at ancient Philistine sites have uncovered golden images of flies.
- After the time of the Philistines, the Jews changed the name to “Beelzeboul,” meaning “lord of dung.” So Beelzebub had become known as the “god of filth,” a name of bitter scorn in the mouth of the Pharisees, an epithet for Satan.

What did the Pharisees think of Jesus?

They denied that He was the Messiah and claimed He had to be doing miracles by the power of demons in order to deceive people into thinking He was the Messiah.

Why do you think the Pharisees denied that Jesus was the Messiah?

- It would shake up the status quo and challenge the religious power they had over the people.
- They rationalized that the Messiah would certainly honor their rules interpreting the Law of God.

What are some of the most popular ideas about Jesus' identity today?

That He is a myth, a guru, a good teacher, an important religious leader, etc. The truth that He is our Creator-God who came in the flesh is by far the minority perspective.

Why are people reluctant to recognize Jesus as God?

The primary reason people reject the idea that God has supernaturally intervened in the affairs of men is pride. They want to run their own lives, and they don't want anyone—especially God—to interfere with the way they're living.

Why do people reject Jesus as their Savior today?

This is the ultimate life decision. There are at least three general categories people reject Jesus today:

- They do not think they need a Savior. These people consider themselves to be “basically good” and do not realize that they, like all people, are sinners who cannot come to God on their own terms.
- They fear social rejection or persecution. “They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God” (John 12:43).
- They think the present world has more to offer than eternity. Matthew 19:16-23 is the account of a man who was not willing to lose his earthly possessions in order to gain an eternal relationship with Jesus.

Besides the eternal consequences, what is the downside to living without Christ in your life?

To live without God's provision for eternal life is to live without hope—hope for His presence with us right now, and hope for eternity. Instead of knowing that God has put us here for a purpose, they end up living without any ultimate meaning in life. This is why Jesus said:

John 10:10 – *I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.*

What does it mean to have life more abundantly?

The Pharisees were essentially enslaving the people they taught. Their religion was legalistic teaching that people could only participate in God's kingdom and receive His blessing if they kept the Law of Moses well enough.

- Jesus sets us free from the tyranny of salvation-by-works and not knowing if you are good enough to earn God's favor.

Why is it remarkable that the Pharisees reacted to this incredible miracle opposite from the multitude?

It was certainly an admission by the Pharisees that Jesus worked miracles supernaturally beyond the reach of any unaided human power. But they attributed this power to Beelzebub instead of God.

- They should have known better: the devil cannot do works of pure goodness.
- In their self-absorbed pride, these Pharisees knew that, if the teachings of Jesus should prevail among the people, their influence over them was at an end.
- So, the miracle they did not deny, but instead attributed it to the power of Satan.

How does this reflect a practice we see frequently in politics?

The ungodly can't win in the free marketplace of ideas on the merits of the policies they advocate so they seek to impugn the character of their opposition. This is often called the politics of personal destruction.

v25 – How is it that Jesus knew the thoughts of the Pharisees?

This was remarkable, but not necessarily a mark of the divinity of Jesus. The Holy Spirit can give the gift of supernatural knowledge to an individual (the word of knowledge mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8).

How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees?

Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation: Jesus logically observed that it makes no sense for Satan to cast out Satan. The Pharisees needed to explain how Satan benefited by the work Jesus had just done.

- One devil may yield and give place to another, to gain a greater advantage for the whole society, but one never quarreled with another.

v26 – What argument did Jesus use to expose the error that the Pharisees were making?

He used logic to help them see that it wasn't to Satan's benefit to allow his followers to lose ground. God gave us the capacity to be logical and he wants us to use it:

Isaiah 1:18 – *Come now, and let us reason together,*” Says the Lord, *“Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.*

v27 – What was Jesus referring to by mentioning that their own sons cast out demons?

The Pharisees themselves often worked to exorcise demons from people. How then did their own Jewish exorcists cast them out?

- The Jewish exorcists operated conventionally using herbs and magical formulae, and the results were probably insignificant. The practice was sanctioned by custom, and harmless.
- But in casting out devils, as in all other things, Jesus was original, and His method was too effectual. His power, manifest to all, was His offence.
- Envy causes persons often to condemn in one, what they approve in another.

v29 – How did this analogy reinforce Jesus' logical argument?

Jesus explained His authority to bind Satan's power. He is stronger than the strong man is.

- Jesus' message was, “I'm not under Satan's power. Instead, I'm proving that I am stronger than he is by casting him out of those he has possessed.”
- “The very fact that I have been able so successfully to invade Satan's territory is proof that he is bound and powerless to resist.”

What is the principle here that we can apply in our own lives?

As we consider the spiritual warfare we're engaged in, we should remember that Jesus gives us the permission to use His name and authority, giving us the strength we need in binding the strong entity who opposes us.

What light does this episode shine on Jesus bringing up the unforgivable sin?

He was cautioning the Pharisees that their denying who Jesus was brought them dangerously close to committing the unforgivable sin.

With that contextual background, let's take another look at Jesus' reference to the unforgivable sin...

v30 – How is it that the one who is not with Jesus is against Him?

Jesus removed illusions about any neutral response to Him or His work. If one is not for Him, then that one is against Him.

- If one does not work with Jesus, by either active opposition or passive disregard, that one works against Jesus (*he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad*).
- Only two forces are at work in the world, the gathering and the scattering. Whoever does the one contradicts the other.

v31 – What sin will not ever be forgiven?

Blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven: Jesus solemnly warned the religious leaders against rejecting Him. Their rejection of Jesus – especially considered what they had seen of Jesus and His work – showed that they were completely rejecting the Holy Spirit's ministry. That ministry is to testify to Jesus, hence the warning of committing the unforgivable sin.

- When the Holy Spirit's testimony of Jesus is fully and finally rejected, one has truly blasphemed Him essentially calling Him a liar.

What is blasphemy?

A deliberate, defiant sin against God. Even in Old Testament times, this sin was considered grievous:

Numbers 15:30-31 - *Anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the Lord's word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them.*

Notice that Jesus did not regard what people said about Him to be unforgivable but that their blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is what is unforgivable...

What is it the Holy Spirit does that makes blasphemy against Him so unforgivable?

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin...

John 16:8 - *"when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment"*

v32 – How is it that speaking against the Holy Spirit has eternal consequences?

It will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come: The eternal consequences of this sin force us to regard it seriously. The continued rejection of Jesus makes people hardened against Him and their pride puts them on the path of a full and final rejection of Him.

Why is it so important for us to acknowledge our sin?

Without the life-giving, repentance-prompting, pride-busting influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we would never repent of our sins which is necessary to receive forgiveness.

What is so disconcerting about the unforgivable sin?

There is this nagging thought that maybe we too have sinned against the Holy Spirit... could we have sinned against the Holy Spirit and not know it? Could we be among the condemned as dead people walking?

- The fact that one desires Jesus at all shows that they are not guilty of this sin.

What distinguishes true followers of Christ from professing Christians who are effectively dead people walking?

- We care about grieving the Holy Spirit... the fact that we ask the question about ourselves is proof we are responsive to the Holy Spirit
- Those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit don't even believe He exists and have no concept of sin against God.

How do people commit the unpardonable sin today?

If a person resists that conviction of the Holy Spirit concerning Jesus and remains unrepentant, then he is choosing hell over heaven. *“Without faith it is impossible to please God”* (Hebrews 11:6), and the object of faith is Jesus (Acts 16:31).

- There is no forgiveness for someone who dies without faith in Christ.
- God has provided for our salvation in His Son (John 3:16). Forgiveness is found exclusively in Jesus (John 14:6). To reject the only Savior is to be left with no means of salvation; to reject the only pardon is, obviously, unpardonable.

Can people commit the unpardonable sin by saying something they regret?

Some people – as a joke or a dare – say words that sounds like the sin of blasphemy against the Spirit. They are flippant about spiritual matters. Yet true blasphemy against the Spirit is more than a formula of words; it is a settled disposition of life that rejects the testimony of the Holy Spirit about Jesus.

- Even if someone has intentionally said such things, they can still repent and prevent a settled rejection of Jesus.
- No person who believes the Divine mission of Jesus Christ has committed this sin... if you're still alive, you have the opportunity to repent.

What applications stand out from our discussion today?

- Jesus authenticated that He was the Messiah by His healing miracles.
- Having Jesus in your life is essential for eternal life and also enables us to live life more abundantly in the here and now.
- When you see a politician impugning their opponent's character, you can be pretty sure that this is a smoke screen trying to hide the fact that their policy position has no merit.
- A logical mind is from God, we should use it.
- Jesus equips us for spiritual warfare, there is no excuse for Christians to be oppressed by demons.
- The unpardonable sin is never recognizing the provision God made for eternal life.