

The Unforgiveable Sin

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Can we put ourselves beyond God's forgiveness? According to Mark 3:28-29 (see also Matthew 12:31-32 and Luke 12:10), 'all people's sins will be forgiven, and whatever blasphemies they may utter — but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never, ever find forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

Some believers naturally worry, whether they or their loved ones have committed this unforgiveable sin of 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.' Perhaps you can commit it without realising what you are doing, they wonder — if so, we could all be in terrible danger of putting ourselves beyond God's love and grace! Is this possible?

To find the answer to this, we need to ask exactly what Jesus meant by 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit', and why he warned people about it just at this point in his ministry. These two questions are actually linked to each other, and together they give us a lot of insight, not just into the Unforgiveable Sin, but also into what Jesus was doing in and through his ministry—and how this affects us today.

The setting in Jesus' ministry is vital! Just at this point, in all three synoptic Gospels, Jesus has been accused by the Pharisees (Matt 12:24), or the 'scribes from Jerusalem' (Mark 3:22), or by 'some of the crowd' (Luke 11:15), of using demonic power to perform exorcisms. Exorcisms were a very prominent feature of Jesus' public ministry, for demon possession was common among Jews at this time. Jesus, in his reply, makes it clear that he was not the only exorcist active then: why do you accuse me of using Satanic power, he asks, when 'your sons' also perform exorcisms and you don't accuse them of using the Devil's own power against him (Matt 12:27, Luke 11:19)?

Jesus is hinting at a hidden motivation in their accusation. They would never dream of accusing their own exorcists of being in league with the Devil. So why do they accuse Jesus of this? They are casting around, looking for something to pin on him, some charge which they can use to bring him down. Why?

To answer this, we need to look back a bit in the story. In the previous chapter in Mark, the Pharisees accused Jesus of blasphemy because he claimed to be able to forgive the sins of the paralysed man: see Mark 2:7, also Matt 9:3, Luke 5:21). Jesus sought to prove that he did indeed have the authority to forgive sins, by performing the 'more difficult' task of healing the paralysis. When that poor man rose magnificently to his feet, picked up his bed and walked out of the house, surrounded by gasps of astonishment, his new *physical* life was a sign of his new *spiritual* life—forgiven, restored to fellowship with God. Jews at that time had a clear sense of the way in which we are psycho-somatic unities, as human beings—so that sometimes spiritual sickness has an effect in our physical make-up, also. This is how the man's *physical* restoration can be a sign of his *spiritual* restoration, as well.

But it signified more than just this. The Pharisees knew the prophecies. They knew, for instance, how in Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 the *forgiveness of sins* was something specially promised for the last days, the days of the Kingdom when God would come to restore his people Israel. By so dramatically claiming to forgive sins, Jesus was making a statement about his own ministry: the time of restoration has come! The Kingdom has drawn near! God is renewing Israel, now, through him.

The scribes and Pharisees naturally saw this as an implied criticism, and threat, to *their* role as the renewers of Israel. That was *their* task, to teach their fellow-Jews how to live lives acceptable to God, how to *please* God by careful obedience to the Law. Part of obedience to the Law is to know how and when to seek forgiveness—through sacrifices in the temple, or through careful celebration of the Day of Atonement and other festivals, and through making restitution for their sins. Forgiveness is *not* received just by having some jumped-up prophet pronounce it like this!

So they were not prepared to accept that Jesus was announcing the eschatological renewal of Israel, the fulfilment of the prophecies—because when it comes, this fulfilment will not bypass the Law! And *they* are the guardians of the Law.

Now we move back to the episode about the Unforgivable Sin, in the next chapter in Mark. After pointing out how ridiculous their accusation is (will Satan really use his own power against himself? Mark 3:23-27), Jesus renews the offer of forgiveness: whatever sins or blasphemies you commit will certainly be forgiven! This is a wonderful offer, taken to heart by all believers. In fact, it's at the heart of the prophecy of the renewal of Israel. Finally, that disastrous history can begin to look different: instead of constantly falling away from God and needing to be called back to repentance through some horrible act of judgment, Israel's sins are now finally to be forgiven (because of Jesus himself, of course: the final and most dreadful blasphemy against 'the Son of Man'—crucifying him—will turn out to be the very means by which sins like that can be forgiven!)

But why then this exception to the offer? Why is 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' excluded from the offer of forgiveness? The answer is obvious, when we look at the prophecies. The renewal of Israel, through the forgiveness of her sins, is to be brought about by an outpouring of the Spirit. See, for instance, Ezekiel 36:25-27: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses ... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you ... I will put my spirit within you!' In this renewal, therefore, receiving the Holy Spirit is *the same as* receiving cleansing and forgiveness. The gift of the Spirit is not mentioned in the story about the paralytic in Mark 2, but the Pharisees knew what Jesus' action implied: he is the agent of the Kingdom outpouring of the Holy Spirit, bringing renewal and forgiveness to all who will receive it.

That's why blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can't be forgiven! It's not like someone who says, 'If you crash my bicycle I'll forgive you, but not if you crash my car!' It's more like 'If you crash my bike I'll forgive you, but if you crash my car I'll never be able

to give you a lift, ever again.’ By resisting the Holy Spirit, they are *by definition* excluding themselves from the renewal in which all sins are finally forgiven.

So believers who embrace the renewal by faith—who say a glad ‘Yes’ to Jesus and experience the forgiveness of their sins as a daily reality in their lives—can *never* commit the unforgiveable sin. This would mean putting themselves right outside the sphere of God’s renewed people. We can imagine this, of course: we can imagine people who, like these Pharisees, want to be the source of their own salvation. They want to renew their own lives, and be admired by others and respected as the source of wise advice for living well. We’ll show you how to live! This is the way to happiness, the secret of fulfilment, the path to wealth and well-being ...But that’s the very opposite of Christian faith. Such people certainly don’t want to depend on a power outside ourselves, the power of the Holy Spirit. True Christian faith starts by seeing *Jesus* as the source of our happiness and fulfilment, and then through him experiences the gift of the Holy Spirit into our lives, bringing new life, forgiveness, joy, hope and hosts of other blessings!

If people *persist* in being the source of their own salvation, then they cannot be forgiven—as long as they stay in that state. If they go on believing in their own power to save themselves, through advancing years and into frailty and eventually death, then they will *never* discover the renewing power of Jesus Christ. But there is an alternative! —the power of the Spirit to renew and save.

So Christians need not worry about this unforgiveable sin. Because, once we’ve tasted the joy of true forgiveness, we don’t want to go back—just like that man, marching out of the house in Capernaum with his head held high, clutching under his arm the symbol of his slavery: can we imagine him stopping, spreading out the mat on the ground again, and lying down on it, saying ‘I prefer to live like this’? Even if sometimes we fall into temptation, usually the experience simply underlines to us how much *more* satisfying it is to live in fellowship with Jesus, by his Spirit, enjoying the forgiveness of our sins!