

Allaying Fears About the Unpardonable Sin

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Abstract

Christian clients occasionally come to counselors or pastors believing they have committed the unpardonable sin. Their fears are sometimes the result of theological misunderstandings about the nature of this sin: at other times they may be the result of psychological disorders that are affecting their theological understanding of this issue. This article identifies eight theories regarding the nature of this sin and examines the biblical passages which describe the unpardonable sin and other sins against the Holy Spirit. The goals of this article are to help Christian counselors become clearer about the identity of this sin and provide some suggested guidelines for counselors and pastors whose clients or parishioners believe they have committed it.

Occasionally people come to a pastor or Christian counselor, fearing that they have committed the unpardonable sin. Christian counselors might initially believe this is a theological issue, and refer the person to a pastor. In some cases the client's anxiety is due to misinformation about the nature of this sin, and a straightforward explanation of its identity and affirmation that one has not committed it may be all that is needed. However, in some cases people who believe they have committed the unpardonable sin may also be suffering from one of several psychological disorders, and a clear theological explanation by itself may not alleviate their anxieties. Thus there is a need for Christian mental health workers to have a relatively clear understanding of the nature of this sin, as well as an understanding of the psychological disorders that may cause a person to fear having committed it.

There are at least five factors that make answering these questions complicated for the typical Christian counselor. One is the fact that throughout history theologians have proposed several definitions of the identity of this sin. A second is that most of the books easily accessible to Christian counselors do not discuss the unpardonable sin. Third, those that do discuss this topic may not discuss the variety of views and help the counselor weigh the evidence for and against each of them. A fourth difficulty is that there are few texts easily accessible to Christian counselors that discuss *in depth* the relationships between the various biblical texts (e.g., Matt. 12 and parallel passages in Mark and Luke; Heb. 6 and 10; and 1 John 5:16–17), all of which seem to be speaking about an unpardonable sin. For example, the typical systematic theology textbook (e.g., Berkhof 1941; Buswell 1962; Erickson 1985; Thiessen 1949; Williams 1988, 1990) devotes *two paragraphs* to this sin, clearly not enough to integrate the material from these various passages as well as discuss which one of the proposed definitions is most compatible with this data. Fifth, there are biblical passages that talk about other sins against the Holy Spirit that *are* pardonable. In order to help clients who fear they have committed the unpardonable sin Christian counselors must have some understanding of what this sin is, so that counselors can help clients who have not committed it be assured that they have not done so.

The purposes of this paper are to (1) describe various views of the unpardonable sin, (2) provide biblical data to help sort through these possible definitions, (3) differentiate between the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus says is unpardonable, and those sins against the Holy Spirit which are pardonable, and (4) to provide some practical counseling guidelines for Christian counselors and pastors when faced with clients or parishioners who have concerns in this area.

Two Preliminary Questions

Two preliminary questions often arise in a discussion of the unpardonable sin. (1) “Is it possible to sin in a way that cannot be forgiven?” and (2) “How can a loving heavenly Father say there is a sin that he will never forgive?”

In our attempt to address the first of these questions we are first confronted with 1 John 1:9 which says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (all scriptural references are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*). It would appear that John is stating a general principle here, similar to Paul’s statement in Romans 3:23 where he says that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” without stating the qualification “except Christ.” This exception to Paul’s general rule is only found by comparing the Romans text with other passages. Similarly, 1 John 1:9 states the general principle that confession of sin to God normally results in forgiveness and cleansing. However, in Mark 3:28–29 Jesus states an exception to this general principle when he says: “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven . . . and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

What is an *eternal sin*? The Greek word used here for “eternal” is *aiōnios*, which means “without beginning or end, eternal, forever” (Brown 1978, 826). Thus a comparison of 1 John 1:9 with Mark 3 indicates that there is a general principle that confession of sin to God will be followed by forgiveness and cleansing, but there is an exception—blasphemy of the Holy Spirit—which will not be forgiven. The Matthew 12:31 parallel (“Every other sin and blasphemy will be forgiven . . . , but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven”) appears to teach that there is only one exception to the 1 John 1:9 principle.

A second preliminary question is, “How can we reconcile the idea of an unforgivable sin with the idea of a gracious God?” Three points can be made in response. First, God’s grace and love are seen in the fact that he freely and continually forgives all manner of sin, even blasphemy against his own Son. Second, there is no *a priori* reason why God, though very gracious and loving, cannot establish some absolute boundary about which he says: “If you transgress this limit, there no longer remains any confession for sin.” Lastly, as we will see in this study, the existence of a sin which God will not pardon is not an indication that he has ceased to be a gracious and loving God. Instead, committing the unpardonable sin only occurs when people so harden themselves that they are no longer likely to ever wish to accept God’s message of salvation in Christ, and therefore remove themselves from the only means of salvation possible.

Various Views of the Unpardonable Sin

Berkhof (1941, 252–53) provides an excellent summary of some of the views of leading theologians regarding the unpardonable sin. Irenaeus believed it was rejection of the gospel. Jerome and Chrysostom believed the unpardonable sin was committed by those who were thoroughly convinced that Christ performed his miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, but hardened their hearts and asserted the miracles were empowered by Satan. They believed this sin could only be committed during Christ’s earthly ministry.

Athanasius believed the unpardonable sin was denial of Christ. Origen believed it was mortal sin after baptism. Augustine and several other highly respected theologians have thought the unpardonable sin was *impenitentia finalis*, (persistence in sin until death). A number of Lutheran theologians, basing their arguments on the Hebrews 6 and 10 passages, have argued that only *the regenerate* (i.e., believers) can commit this sin, much to the consternation of their Reformed counterparts. Broadus (cited in Carson 1984, 291) believed that it could only occur during the “age of miracles,” when the Holy Spirit’s power, as demonstrated through the miracles of Jesus and his followers, could be directly experienced and rejected. A common belief among some Christians today who fear they may have committed it is that the unpardonable sin involves

unwittingly insulting Jesus or his works. Thus, we have at least eight possible definitions of the unpardonable sin.

The Primary Scriptural Discussion

Matthew 12:22–37

Chapters three through 11 of the book of Matthew recount the beginning of Christ's teaching, preaching, and healing ministry. Throughout the time covered by these chapters Christ had given ample evidence that he was the Messiah, not only by the authority with which he spoke (e.g., Matt. 7:28–29; 8:23–27; 9:8; 10:1), but also by what must have amounted to hundreds of miracles (Matt. 4:23–25; 8:1–16, 23–24; 9:1–8, 18–35; 10:1–8; 12:9–13). Many responded to these manifestations of God's love and power in faith, but there was another group who, faced with the same evidence of God's presence among them, responded by "hardening their hearts" against him. This resistance to God's working in their midst had reached a point where it manifested itself, not only in personal stubbornness, but even in outright, deliberate planning to destroy Jesus (12:14). The text reads:

Matthew 12:22–37; cf. Mark 3:20–30, Luke 11:14–23; 12:8–10

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 Beelzebub, 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 Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. 28 But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house. 30 He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. 31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the 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.

33 Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Jesus had just healed a blind and mute demoniac, causing some people to raise the question of whether or not he was the Son of David (i.e., the Messiah: Carson 1984, 268). The Pharisees respond to this questioning by saying that Jesus is not the Messiah, and that he casts out demons by the spirit and power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. In the remainder of the passage Jesus addresses these two issues: (1) Whether or not he is the Messiah, and (2) What is the power by which he casts out demons.

In verses 25–27 Jesus gave two arguments refuting the charge that he was casting out demons by the power of Satan: (a) In the spiritual world as in the physical no power engages in civil war against itself, for then it would be destroying itself. (b) If Satan is the power behind

Jesus' exorcisms, then is he not also the power behind the exorcisms performed by the Pharisees' people? This is an ad hominem argument (Carson 1984, 288). There was a general belief among the Jews at the time that when a rabbi or other Jew delivered someone from demon possession, it was a sign that God worked through him (Geldenhuis 1979). There were Jewish exorcists who cast out demons (Matt. 7:22; Mark 9:38; Acts 19:13), and the Pharisees did not claim that the exorcists were in league with Satan. Why then were they asserting that when Jesus cast out a demon it was through Satan's power? On the contrary, Jesus implies that these two assertions of the Pharisees are wrong, and that he casts out demons by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 28).

Jesus was robbing Satan of his power. He could not do this unless he had the strength to overpower him (v. 29). Jesus then went on to assert that it was impossible for his hearers to be neutral in this struggle between God and Satan (v. 30). In verses 31 and 32 he discussed the consequences of those who hold the views expressed in verses 23 and 24: (1) forgiveness is possible for those who speak against the Son of God and later repent. (2) Forgiveness is not possible for those who attribute the working of the Holy Spirit (as in the miracles Jesus performed here on earth, v. 28) to the working of Satan. In the concluding verses of this passage (vv. 33–37) Jesus strongly confronts the Pharisees, saying that their allegations that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub were due, not to a well-intentioned but mistaken judgment on their part, but because spiritually they were "evil" and "a brood of vipers" (v. 34).

Thus the textual evidence cited here suggests that *the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is willfully misattributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the work of Satan in spite of clear evidence to the contrary*. The unpardonable sin is not unwittingly insulting Jesus or his works, as many have feared. Jesus says very clearly in verse 32 that whoever speaks a word against himself can be forgiven. The unpardonable sin is not something committed hastily or rashly, but rather, it is an action such as the Pharisees were in danger of committing when, faced with massive evidence that Jesus was the Messiah and that the Holy Spirit was working through him, because of their evil hearts they hardened themselves against God, and attributed the working of the Holy Spirit to the work of Satan.

This unpardonable sin is thus not a hasty decision based on either a momentary impulse or misinformation. Rather, it was the culmination of a long set of experiences in which a person has repeatedly been exposed to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in his or her life, and yet rejects this power. Instead of accepting God's person and presence, the Pharisees had rejected it to the point of despising it, and called the Holy Spirit's work the work of Satan.

This sin of rejecting the Holy Spirit's work is unpardonable primarily because a person who commits this sin has rejected God's grace, and has voluntarily set himself or herself in continuing, deliberate rebellion against God. The person who, while under conviction or because of misinformation, momentarily rejects Christ's or the Holy Spirit's working in his life, but now is repenting of such, is in a very different spiritual state than the Pharisees here.

Related Scriptural Passages

There are three other Scriptures that seem to discuss an unpardonable sin. These include 1 John 5:16–17; Hebrews 6:4–6; and Hebrews 10:26–27. While occasionally an expositor questions whether these passages are discussing the same sin (e.g., Liefeld 1984, 960), the vast majority of expositors believe these passages are related (e.g., Berkhof 1941; Carson 1984; Jewett 1975; Mullins 1996; Ress 1996; Thiessen 1949). The biblical reason for believing that these passages are connected is that since Matthew 12:31 states that there is only one sin that cannot be pardoned, and each of these passages appears to be discussing an unpardonable sin, it follows that there must be a connection between the concepts expressed in the Synoptics and in them.

1 John 5:16–17

The 1 John passage says:

16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

John tells us that there is sin which is *mortal* (most expositors believe mortal in this passage refers to unpardonable), but does not aid us in identifying it further. The passage is primarily concerned with exhorting us to pray for those who commit sins which are not “mortal,” that they may be saved or restored to fellowship.

Because of the brevity of this passage and the fact that John’s reference to “mortal sin” was something that had a clear meaning to his readers (but no longer does to us), speculation about the meaning of this passage has been far-ranging (see Stott 1964, 187–90 for an excellent historical survey of interpretations). It is far from clear what the distinction is between a “mortal sin” and a sin that is not “mortal.” It is also not clear whether the death being referred to is spiritual death or physical death.

In the Old Testament God made a distinction between sins of ignorance or inadvertence that could be atoned for (Lev. 4; Num. 15:22–29), versus deliberate or presumptuous sins (e.g., sinning with a “high hand”—Num. 15:30–31; Ps. 19:13) for which there was no forgiveness. This distinction was still found in first century Judaism in the Qumran community, and could have been what John had in mind (Barker 1981, 355–56).

This distinction has been brought into the New Testament era via the Roman Catholic church, which has historically distinguished between mortal and venial sins. When people commit venial sins they are ambivalent: they choose to sin, but something within them yearns not to do so. There is a cognitive dissonance produced by the action of sinning—the person experiences guilt feelings. However, when people commit mortal sins there is no ambivalence or cognitive dissonance. The person chooses to sin, and expresses the type of individual he or she wishes to become through that action. Mortal sin is believed, by such theologians, to extinguish the life of God in the soul, leading to spiritual death (Harm 1984, 1016).

One difficulty applying this dichotomy to this passage is that since it is impossible for human beings to know what is in one another’s hearts, it is impossible for believers to know whether someone is committing a venial sin (and therefore one should pray for him or her), or a mortal sin (in which case prayers will avail nothing).

When interpreting a passage, it is important to try to understand its historical context. In his First Epistle John was confronting an early form of Gnosticism, a belief that denied the Incarnation of Christ and taught a dualism that led to either a harsh asceticism or paradoxically, to licentiousness. The Gnostics claimed to have access to special “knowledge,” knowledge that they used to undermine the orthodox teachings of the Old and New Testaments. John’s reference to sin which leads to death may be a reference to those Gnostic teachers who were teaching false doctrine and immorality, and who had so hardened themselves that no repentance was likely (Stott 1964, 190; NIV Study Bible 1985, 1913). Those for whom one might pray (i.e., those who had not committed a mortal sin) were those who were still open to the Holy Spirit’s work. Since it is impossible to know with certainty John’s referents here, it is probably wisest to base our understanding of the unpardonable sin on the clearer passages found in the Synoptics and in Hebrews.

Hebrews 6:4–12

The Hebrews passages also appear to speak of an unpardonable sin. Hebrews 6 reads as follows:

4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, 6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. 9 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation. 10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. 11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. 12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Hebrews 10:26–39

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. 35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. 36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For in just a very little while, “He who is coming will come and will not delay. 38 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.” 39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

These passages have caused great alarm for many believers, particularly the second one, for all of us, when really honest with ourselves, must admit that we have committed some deliberate sins, even after salvation. However, if this interpretation is correct, then heaven will probably be missing most of the biblical characters we have read about, for Abraham deliberately lied, Moses struck the rock in deliberate anger, David deliberately sinned with Bathsheba, and Peter deliberately denied Christ, not once, but several times. Yet we know from other passages that all of these persons were pardoned, even of these deliberate sins.

A closer look at the context of these passages suggests that they are not speaking of all types of deliberate sinning as unpardonable, but of a specific type of sin only. Hebrews was written to Jews who had professed faith in Christ, but were now undergoing severe persecution (10:32–38) and were in danger of abandoning their profession of faith and lapsing back into Jewish legalism. The book is a series of exhortations, using a variety of arguments which demonstrated the superiority of the new covenant over the old, and encouraging them to hold fast to their new-found faith (cf. 6:9–12).

Within the context of these encouragements the two warnings of Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 occur—that if having experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and the goodness of the word of God, they now deliberately sin by turning their backs on Christ and the Holy Spirit’s ministry in their lives, there remains no more sacrifice *for that sin*. What the author of Hebrews is addressing is a permanent repudiation of Christ, not the temporary conflict that most unbelievers experience when they initially come under conviction by the Holy Spirit. The phrases “trample the Son of God underfoot” and “treat as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him” speak not just of momentarily rejecting Christ as one wrestles with the Holy Spirit, but an arrogant despising of the Son of God (Bruce 1964, 259; Morris 1981, 106–7). In

one action they would have rejected the only way of salvation possible, and also (implicitly) repudiated the work of the Holy Spirit (who had wooed them toward faith in Christ) as being from God.

Arminian and Calvinistic Interpretations of These Passages

There are some significant differences in the way Christians who identify with the teachings of Jacob Arminius (as well as some Lutherans) and those who identify with the teachings of John Calvin on the theological issue of perseverance would interpret these passages. The following discussion will attempt to describe both of these approaches to the interpretation of Hebrews 6 and 10. Before beginning that discussion let us briefly consider one approach to the interpretation of these passages, namely the theory that the falling away from the faith (apostasy) mentioned here is not an actual possibility—that this is a purely hypothetical situation that could never actually happen. This idea has been suggested by various writers including Wuest (1962, 52), and has gained some popularity.

Leon Morris and F. F. Bruce, both highly respected New Testament scholars, make the following comments about the above idea. Morris (1981) says:

Unless the writer is speaking of something that could really happen, it is not a warning about anything. Granted, he does not say that anyone has apostatized in this way, nevertheless, he surely means that someone could, and he does not want his readers to do so (p. 56).

Similarly, F.F. Bruce (1964) says: *[The] biblical writers (the writer to the Hebrews being no exception) are not given to the setting up of men of straw. The warning of this passage was a real warning against a real danger, a danger which is still present so long as 'an evil heart of unbelief' can result in 'falling away from the living God' (Heb. 3:12) (p. 122).*

In light of the above statements, it seems wisest to consider that the apostatizing (falling away from the truth) described in chapters 6 and 10 could actually occur, and is not a hypothetical situation that could never actually happen.

Arminian and Lutheran Interpretations

Arminians and some Lutherans, based on these passages, believe it is possible to be saved and then repudiate one's salvation. They would point to the fact that those in danger of falling away are described in the following ways. They: (a) have been enlightened (6:4a), (b) have tasted the heavenly gift (6:4b), (c) have shared in the Holy Spirit (6:4c), (d) have tasted the goodness of the word of God (6:5a), and (e) have tasted the powers of the coming age (6:5b). In addition, in chapter 10 the person in danger was further described as (f) someone who was in danger of "treating as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant *that had sanctified him* [italics added] (10:29), and (g) a "righteous one [who] will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (10:38–39). Arminians and some Lutherans believe that these seven characteristics describe someone who is saved, and then rejects that salvation. In addition, they would cite Matthew 24:9–10; Galatians 1:6; 5:4, 7; 1 Timothy 4:1; James 5:19–20; and 2 Peter 2:1–22; 3:17 as evidence that believers can fall away from the faith.

Calvinistic or Reformed Interpretations

Those who believe that people who are truly saved will undoubtedly persevere point to a number of Scriptures that appear to teach this truth (e.g., John 3:16, 18; 5:24; 6:37; 10:27–29; Rom. 4:5; 8:15–16; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; Eph. 1:3–5).

A difficulty confronting the view that those who are saved will definitely persevere is the fact that several of the verses listed under the previous section (e.g., Matt. 24:9–10; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:1–22, esp. vv. 15, 20–21) refer to *brothers* who have either fallen away from the faith or are in danger of doing so. In addition, the Epistle to the Hebrews encourages readers, who are

referred to as brothers, not to abandon the faith.

One way of reconciling the view that true believers will not fall away from the faith with the fact that people who are called “brothers” are sometimes described as having fallen away (or being in danger of falling away) is based on the way the word “brother” is used in the New Testament. Stott (1964, 190) and also Carson (1997, personal communication) suggest that the word “brother” is sometimes used in the broader senses of either neighbor, nominal Christian, or of a church member who professes to be a Christian but who, as his or her subsequent behavior or teaching eventually shows, was never truly a believer (1 John 2:19). Examples of these broader connotations of the use of the word “brother” may be found in Matthew 5:21–24; 7:3–5; James 5:19–20; 1 John 2:9, 11, 19, 22, 23; 3:10; and 2 John 9.

This same approach may be applied to an understanding of chapters 6 and 10 of the book of Hebrews. The group of persons to whom the author wrote was probably composed of some who had made a deep, life-changing commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord, others who were carnal believers (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1–4), and others who may have only nominally affiliated themselves with the group of believers. Even as nominal believers they would have had an opportunity to observe the Holy Spirit’s work and experienced (at least at a minimal if not a full level) the goodness of God. They had come to the very door of the household of faith, had looked inside, and seen what was potentially there for them to enjoy. The writer of Hebrews, according to a Calvinist interpretation, is urging these nominal believers, as they face future persecutions, to come all the way into the household of faith. They had a choice though: having experienced the reality of God’s grace, they could harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, and repudiate his work (of bringing them to a saving knowledge of Christ), acting as if his work was actually the work of Satan.

Integration of the Synoptic and Hebrews Passages

Thus there is a basic similarity between the Jews reading the book of Hebrews and the Pharisees one generation before. Both groups, having ample evidence of the power and presence of God in their midst through the person of the Holy Spirit, deliberately hardened their hearts and repudiated this Spirit as being from God, either explicitly (as in the Pharisees’ accusation that it was actually the power of Satan) or implicitly by their actions (as with the Hebrews who were in danger of rejecting his saving work in their lives).

Persons who harden themselves to the extreme point where they call the Holy Spirit’s work the work of Satan are, like the Pharisees, unlikely to ever repent. Thus persons who are sincerely concerned about whether they have committed the unpardonable sin can probably be assured that they have not done so.

Other Sins against the Holy Spirit

There are at least four other types of sin against the Holy Spirit mentioned in Scripture. Each of these, while sin, is not an unpardonable sin. These include lying to the Spirit, resisting the Spirit, grieving the Spirit, and quenching the Spirit (Erickson 1985, 862; Mullins 1996). Each of these is described briefly below:

Lying to the Spirit (or testing the Spirit).

Acts 5:1–11 tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who tried to create the false impression to the members of the church in Jerusalem that they were giving all the proceeds of a sale to the church, when in fact they were only giving a portion of the proceeds. Their sin was not that they kept part of the proceeds for themselves, but that they lied to the church by saying they had donated the entire amount when they had not.

Peter confronted Ananias with the following words: “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so

filled your heart that you have *lied to the Holy Spirit* [italics added] and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"(v. 3). Three hours later he confronted Sapphira with slightly different words, but apparently the same meaning: "How could you agree to *test the Spirit* [italics added] of the Lord?"(v. 9).

From our distant historical perspective we may fail to fully understand the psychological or spiritual significance of what occurred here. The New Testament church was just becoming a community of believers for the first time. The Holy Spirit was bringing together individual believers with powerful miracles of healing and a new-found love for each other. Blaiklock (1959) describes the significance this way:

Two persons set out deliberately to deceive their leaders and their friends, to build a reputation for sanctity and sacrifice to which they had no right, and to menace, is so doing, all love, all trust, all sincerity. And not only was the sin against human brotherhood, but against the Spirit of God, so recently and powerfully manifest in the Church. . . . We can with difficulty realize the significance of this, the first sin in and against the community (pp. 69–70).

Ananias, in attempting to deliberately deceive the Christian community into believing he was pious when he was really motivated by narcissism, was lying not only to humans but also the Holy Spirit who indwelt the church (1 Cor. 3:16–17). By deliberately trying to deceive God and his people, they were both "lying" to God and "testing" God (vv. 3, 11). The essence of this sin is the hypocrisy which Jesus spoke so strongly against in Matthew 23:15–16, that is, intentionally trying to deceive other believers (and the Holy Spirit who is within them) that they were spiritual when they were actually carnal.

It would not be theologically valid to overgeneralize from this situation. Ananias's and Sapphira's attempt to lie and to create an image of false piety resulted in their immediate death, but this does not mean that every attempt to lie to the Spirit and create an image of false piety will result in the identical judgment. When God inaugurates a new step in salvation history, he typically judges the first acts of disobedience decisively, perhaps to motivate others to observe his commandments carefully. Thus we can see similarities in God's judgment on Nadab and Abihu (the inauguration of the Levitical priesthood—Lev. 10:2), Achan (entry into the Promised Land—Josh. 7:25), and Ananias and Sapphira (the first attempt at open spiritual deceit in the New Testament church). Longenecker (1981) states:

The way Ananias and Sapphira attempted to reach their goals was so diametrically opposed to the whole thrust of the gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission of the church off course. Like the act of Achan, this episode was pivotal in the life and mission of God's people, for the whole enterprise was threatened at its start. And while we may be thankful that judgment upon deceit in the church is not now so swift and drastic, this incident stands as an indelible warning regarding the heinousness in God's sight of deception in spiritual and personal matters. (p. 314)

We are not told in the biblical record whether Ananias and Sapphira were true believers who momentarily engaged in sin, or whether they were never truly born again. If they were true believers the judgment that befell them may be an example of God's hand of *temporal* judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 11:31–32), but may not necessarily indicate that Ananias and Sapphira lost their salvation (or were never true believers to begin with). On the other hand, their behavior may indicate that they were never true believers. Scripture is silent on this point, and in light of the limited information we have about them there is probably little benefit in debating the issue (Bruce, 1980). The incident does remind us that the sin of lying to the Spirit or testing the Spirit may be judged very seriously.

Resisting the Holy Spirit.

Just as there are probably numerous ways that people can lie to or test the Spirit, of which Acts 5 (above) gives us one example, there are probably also numerous ways in which we can resist the Holy Spirit. Stephen, in the famous sermon that resulted in his martyrdom, described

one of those ways:

51 You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it. (Acts 7:51–53)

Resisting the Holy Spirit, in these illustrations, means rejecting the message God was sending and the messengers through whom God was sending that message. To have “uncircumcised hearts and ears” meant that, while the Jews to whom Stephen was preaching were *physically* circumcised, they were as disobedient and unresponsive to God’s revelation as the gentiles who had never experienced a personal relationship with him (Bruce 1980, 162). Individuals who resist the Spirit are not guilty of the unpardonable sin, but are guilty of unpardoned sin. They can be saved if they repent, unlike those who have committed the unpardonable sin. However, if they die without turning to the Lord, they will miss heaven. Unbelievers who do not turn to the Lord when exposed to the Gospel are guilty of resisting the Spirit.

Grieving the Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 4:17–31 the Apostle Paul appeals to the Ephesian believers to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their attitudes, desires and behavior, putting off the old mindset and lifestyle of the nonbeliever, and putting on a new mindset and lifestyle. They are to put off a mindset characterized by sensuality and impurity and exchange it for one characterized by righteousness and holiness (vv. 17–24). When angry, they are neither to be aggressive, nor are they to suppress their anger and fail to deal with it (vv. 26–27). They must not steal, but are to work, and even share the fruit of their labor with those in need (v. 28). They are not to gossip and slander, but only say words that will build up the body of Christ (v. 29). Verse 30 reads: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Because the Holy Spirit lives within us, he is intimately aware of all our thoughts and feelings. When we continue to live a sinful lifestyle or even think sinful thoughts we grieve him. Those who live this way (sometimes known as carnal Christians) are not spoken of as losing their salvation, since being “sealed” (v. 30b) in biblical terminology refers to a mark of ownership, and believers are sealed for the day of redemption. Nevertheless, continuing to live a life of sin after salvation means that we grieve God.

Quenching the Holy Spirit.

Paul concludes his first letter to the Thessalonians with several concise admonitions. He says: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire [or ‘Do not quench the Spirit’]; do not treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thess. 5:16–20).

Because the command to not quench the Spirit is so brief, it is not possible to say with certainty what it is referring to, but it seems likely that this phrase should be contrasted with Ephesians 5:18–20, which speaks of being *filled with the Spirit* as resulting in joyful praise and thanksgiving within church services. A number of commentators (e.g., Morris 1956, 103–5; Morris 1959, 175–77; Robertson 1931, 37; Thomas 1978, 291–92) suggest that in Thessalonica it is likely that some of the church leaders had reacted to the work of the Holy Spirit in a way opposite to the Corinthians. The Corinthians had not exercised enough self-control: the Thessalonian leaders had perhaps reacted with overcontrol that repressed or quenched the Spirit’s work. Paul calls for a balance: there is a place for prayer, continual thankfulness, and prophetic (Spirit-inspired) utterances in the Ephesian church. There are differences among Christians about whether this third manifestation of the Spirit (Spirit-inspired utterances) remains operative today, but there is no disagreement that the other manifestations of the fullness of the Spirit—joyfulness,

continual prayer, and thankfulness, should be part of our lives and corporate worship. Quenching the Spirit, then, would mean *reacting to the Holy Spirit's work by an overcontrol that stifles the Spirit's ability to manifest himself in our lives and corporate worship.*

Summary and Analysis of Various Views

If the above analysis is correct, then the unpardonable sin refers to a situation where people have had multiple opportunities to see and experience the grace of God in their lives, and have either come to the very threshold of salvation (Calvinism) or perhaps even experienced salvation through the work of the Holy Spirit (Arminianism). Having ample evidence that this is the work of God's Spirit either around them or within them, instead of asking Christ into their lives they harden their hearts against him. But they do not stop there, for if they did, they could still be pardoned (Matt. 12:32). They continue to harden themselves to such a degree that they blaspheme the Holy Spirit by saying that his work in their lives is not the work of God, but is actually the work of Satan. The sin represents a conscious, malicious, willful rejection and slandering, in spite of massive evidence that the Holy Spirit is drawing one to Christ, and in a spirit of hatred and enmity, attributing the Holy Spirit's work to the prince of darkness (Berkhof 1941, 253). This definition of the unpardonable sin now represents a solid consensus among contemporary evangelical expositors (e.g., Bavinck, n.d., cited in Geldenhuys, 1979, p. 352; Berkhof 1941, 252–54; Beyer 1964, 624; Carson 1984, 291–92; Impeta n.d., cited in Geldenhuys 1979, 352; Jewett 1975, 190; Lane 1974, 145; Liefeld 1984, 960; Mitton 1957, 28; Mullins 1996; Stott 1964, 188–89; Weisel 1984, 646; Williams 1988, 256; Williams 1990, 66).

From this discussion we can rule out three of the historic definitions that have been given of the unpardonable sin. Irenaeus believed it was rejection of the Gospel; Athanasius said it was denial of Christ, and Augustine thought it was persistence in sin until death. Persons guilty of any of these sins are guilty of *unpardoned sin*. If they continue to reject the Gospel or deny Christ until they die they will go to the same destination as those who have committed the unpardonable sin. But there is a basic difference. Anyone in these three groups could repent and be saved anytime up to the point of death. However, Jesus said that the Pharisees were in danger of committing an eternal sin, one which constituted such a state of hardness and rebellion against God's Spirit that Jesus declared that whoever committed it will “not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (v. 32).

Jerome and Chrysostom, as the reader may remember, believed the unpardonable sin was committed by those who were thoroughly convinced that Christ performed his miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, but hardened their hearts and asserted the miracles were empowered by Satan. Their definition is essentially the one accepted by the majority of evangelical expositors today.

However, Jerome and Chrysostom believed this sin could only be committed during Christ's earthly ministry. There are at least two reasons to question this portion of their discussion. First, such an argument might have more strength if the unpardonable sin was directed against Jesus himself: however, the unpardonable sin is the sin of blaspheming the work of *the Holy Spirit*. Second, nowhere in God's Word is there a statement that this sin could only be committed during Jesus' first coming. The fact that the recipients of the book of Hebrews and John's First Epistle were being warned not to commit this sin suggests that it could occur after Christ had ascended into heaven. These same arguments could be used against Broadus' assertion that the unpardonable sin could only be committed during “the age of miracles.”

The fear sometimes found among Christians today, namely that the unpardonable sin involves unwittingly insulting Jesus or his works, can be easily laid to rest. Jesus clearly stated that those who speak against him *can* be forgiven (Matt. 12:32). Furthermore, the unpardonable sin is not something committed by mistake; it only occurs after someone has hardened his heart to such a point of defiant rebellion that he consciously and volitionally calls the work of God the

work of Satan.

Counseling Implications for Pastors and Christian Therapists

Several points regarding the above analysis that may be useful in counseling are:

1. Persons who come to a counselor with concerns about having committed the unpardonable sin may be helped by exploration of what they have done that they believe is unpardonable, and then comparing this with the biblical description of the unpardonable sin.

2. There is a consensus among theologians who have written about the unpardonable sin that if people are concerned that they have committed it, this is evidence that they probably have not (e.g., Burge 1984, 1017; Cranfield 1963; Hebert, cited in Martin 1982; Ryle n.d.; Wessel 1984). Cranfield (1963) states it well:

It is a matter of great importance pastorally that we can say with absolute confidence to anyone who is overwhelmed by the fear that he has committed this sin, that the fact that he is so troubled is itself a sure proof that he has not committed it. A person so insensitive to the Spirit that he attributes what is of God to demonic origin will not be conscious of having committed the ultimate transgression. (142)

3. There are several other sins persons may commit against the Holy Spirit. These include attempting to lie to the Holy Spirit, resisting the Holy Spirit, grieving the Holy Spirit (by allowing carnality to remain in one's life), or quenching the Spirit (by not allowing him to express himself in one's life). All of these sins should be repented of, but they are not the unpardonable sin, so forgiveness is available for the person who commits them. Therefore if a person has sinned against the Holy Spirit in one of these ways, he or she can be encouraged to confess that sin, and then be assured that their sin is forgiven.

4. If these clarifications do not seem to allay a client's anxiety, it may be that other repressed or suppressed sins are causing generalized guilt feelings, and that these need to be explored and confessed.

5. An overly strict conscience code may make it impossible for the person to live without continuous guilt feelings; in this situation exploring the content of the person's conscience code and helping him or her change its standards so that they are more consistent with the Bible's teaching may be helpful.

6. Persons with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder or depressive personality disorder (one of the experimental diagnoses in the DSM-IV) may sometimes have their ego defenses overwhelmed by attendance at crusades or certain seminars, and fear that they were never really saved, have lost their salvation, or have committed the unpardonable sin. Clarification and supportive therapy may be helpful for them.

7. Some people may believe they have committed the unpardonable sin because of biological disorders such as major depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, schizophrenia or delusional disorder. (We now know that these disorders may appear in children and adolescents as well as adults, so the clinician should be aware of this possibility.) If the person does not respond to any of the above approaches and shows other symptoms consistent with one of these mental disorders, appropriate medication may be the most helpful treatment. If the fear of having committed the unpardonable sin is due to one of these disorders and initial clarification and reassurance does not change the belief, further debate is unlikely to help and may only serve to strengthen the intensity of the delusion or obsession. Once medication has broken up the delusion or obsessive thought, the unnecessary fear often disappears without further intervention. However, biblically based reassurance that the person has not committed the unpardonable sin may lessen the chances of relapse.

8. If fears about having committed the unpardonable sin are due to one of the above biological disorders, care should be taken so that the client or parishioner does not stop taking medication prematurely or relapse may occur. Persons with major depression who stop

antidepressants too quickly may experience a recurrence of the depression, and it may not respond to a second round of antidepressants as rapidly or fully as it did to the first round. Similarly, for those with bipolar disorder, current treatment guidelines recommend permanent use of mood-stabilizing medication, for without it each manic or depressive episode tends to become more serious and difficult to treat. Therefore the therapist may want to preventatively encourage the client not to stop medication when he or she feels better without approval of one's psychiatrist.

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