

The Sin Against *the* Holy Spirit



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 12:22-31, Mark 3:22-30, 10:45, Luke 18:10-14, John 3:14-16, 1 Cor. 15:3, 1 Tim. 1:15, Heb. 2:9.*

Memory Text: “Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: but he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation” (*Mark 3:28, 29*).

Of all the hard sayings in the Bible, this memory text has to be among the most difficult. Considering who Jesus was and what He did in order to be able to forgive our sins, the idea of a sin that even the Cross doesn't make provision for should cause us to tremble. Murder, incest, pride, adultery, theft, idolatry, even words spoken against Christ (*Matt. 12:21-32*) can be forgiven (*Eph. 1:7*); yet, in the words of Christ Himself, “he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness” (*Mark 3:29*). That's incredible!

Thus, the logical question is “What is this so-called ‘unpardonable sin’” (a phrase that, by the way, never appears in Scripture)? The whole idea of a sin that can't be forgiven seems so contrary to all we know about the God who went through so much precisely in order to forgive us all our sins. That's why this is a topic so worthy of study—for we all need to be aware of the one thing that, more than anything else, leaves us, as Jesus said, “in danger of eternal damnation” (*vs. 29*).

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 17.*

To Save Sinners

According to 1 Timothy 1:15, what was the purpose of Christ's coming to this earth?

Volumes could be written about the reasons for the incredible story of Jesus Christ, the God who veiled His divinity in humanity and died in our stead the death that we, as sinners, deserve. Among those reasons for the life and death of Jesus are:

1. He came in order to reveal to us just what God was like (*John 14:9*).
2. He came in order to be a Servant of God and show what servanthood was about (*Matt. 20:25-28, Phil. 2:5-7*).
3. He came to leave us an example of how to live (*John 2:6, 1 Pet. 2:21*).
4. He came in order to be a faithful and merciful High Priest in our behalf (*Heb. 2:17, 18*).

All these things, however important, would be meaningless to us without what's undoubtedly the most crucial aspect of Christ's earthly mission.

Read Mark 10:45, John 3:14-16, 1 Cor. 15:3, Heb. 2:9, and 1 John 3:8. What reasons do these texts together give for the life and death of Jesus?

Of all the reasons Jesus came and died, the most important—at least from our perspective—is that He died to save us from the legal penalty of sin, which is death, eternal death. And the great news is that through His work He is able to do just that for anyone who accepts Him. Salvation comes to all who believe, the Jew first and then the Gentile (*Rom. 2:9*). Those who believe are then spared the “eternal damnation” Jesus warned about in numerous places, including Mark 3:29, in which He talked about the one sin that could lead to this damnation. Thus, if through belief in Him we are spared this “eternal damnation,” and if the “unpardonable sin” leads to this damnation, what most likely is this “unpardonable sin” really about?

Key Text: *Matthew 12:22-32*

Teachers Aims:

1. To discuss the importance of believing in the forgiveness that Jesus provides.
2. To clarify the reason that “blasphemy” against the Holy Spirit is not forgiven, and to show why it is so important not to give up on oneself or anyone else.

Lesson Outline:

Jesus’ entire purpose was to save sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15*).

- A. Through Jesus’ death we have forgiveness of sins.
- B. The Holy Spirit helps us to fully understand all that Jesus did for us by convicting us of our sins and leading us to repentance.
- C. The “unpardonable sin” is the *complete* rejection of the Holy Spirit (*Mark 3:28, 29*).
- D. This is not a sin of ignorance but of determined effort.

Summary: Committing the “unpardonable sin” is a work of a lifetime. God’s Holy Spirit is continuously trying to woo us to Himself and Jesus. He doesn’t give up easily because each soul is worth the life of Jesus. We should, therefore, always pray for and seek the lost because only the Trinity knows who has truly committed the “unpardonable sin.” Often those who appear to be furthest from God are closer than you might think. Remember, the only reason this sin is “unpardonable” is because the sinner does not *want* or *feel the need* for pardon.

COMMENTARY

Introduction

While the central aim of the gospel is to save us by bringing us to repentance, confession, and forsaking of our sins, human pride strenuously resists. God’s goodness is actively at work to lead us to repentance by convicting us of sin and revealing the righteousness, mercy, and judgment of God. Those who reject that revelation and convicting influence place themselves on the road to committing the unpardonable sin.

I. To Save Sinners

Christ came primarily to save us from sin. (*See Luke 19:10, 1 Tim. 1:15.*) This supremely challenging mission also included a restoration of the knowledge and experience of God’s truth, which the stultifying effects of sin had obliterated.

God is love. Jesus came to break the power of Satan, the author of sin, and destroy him, while saving repentant sinners from the

“All Manner of Sin and Blasphemy”

Read Matthew 12:22-31 and summarize the context in which Jesus said what He did. Notice, too, to whom He was speaking. How does that help us understand what He was saying in regard to the “unpardonable sin”? See also Mark 3:22-30.

Christ’s strong words didn’t appear in a vacuum. Instead, they were expressed in response to a statement by certain Pharisees who, after witnessing a healing performed by Jesus, said He “cast out devils” (*Matt. 12:24*) by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. This attitude was taken in the face of undeniable evidence given them of His divine power: the holiness of His life, which they could but recognize and which they later tacitly admitted (*John 8:46*); His supernatural healing of the sick (*Matt. 8:14-17, Mark 1:29-34, etc.*); His casting out of devils (*Matt. 9:32, 33*); and His raising of the dead (*Luke 7:11-17*).

However, by refusing to admit Christ’s divinity, and by actively opposing Him, these men had placed themselves in such a position that they were forced to explain His works on some other grounds than divine and, hence, assigned to Satan the work of God. They thereby closed their minds to the evidence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit impresses truth upon the mind and heart (*John 14:17, 16:13*) and convicts of sin (*John 16:8*). But although God is long-suffering and merciful and not willing that any should perish (*2 Pet. 3:9*), His Spirit will not labor with the obdurate heart indefinitely (*Gen. 6:3*). If truth is persistently resisted and refused, the Spirit’s promptings cease to be heard, and the soul is left in terrible darkness.

This is possibly the condition to which Paul referred when he described certain consciences as being “seared with a hot iron” (*1 Tim. 4:2*). For a person guilty of the sin against the Holy Ghost, probation has closed, and there is for him or her “no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment” (*Heb. 10:26, 27*).

From what you’ve read so far this week, what’s your understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit?

presence, power, and consequences of evil.

Christ came into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it through His atoning grace. He reveals Himself as “a God ready to pardon” (*Neh. 9:16*), who “delights in mercy” (*Mic. 7:18*). To reject our need of God’s mercy for pardon and sanctification is to turn the oasis of life’s supreme opportunity into a bleak spiritual desert. It is to choose death over life. (*See Deut. 30:11-20; Prov. 1:22-33; Isa. 5:1-5, 18-24; Rom. 10:21.*)

II. All Manner of Sin and Blasphemy

God can forgive the vilest of offenses if our hearts are open to the convictions of the Spirit to show us His way. (*See Rom. 8:14.*) People may reject the Bible and Christ (at least initially) because of misrepresentation, but if they are open to the Spirit of truth, God will lead them to repentance and belief in the truth they once ignorantly despised. If, however, the spirit of error is persistently chosen over the Spirit of truth, then we are flirting with the unpardonable sin.

Yet we are not authorized to tell anyone that they have stepped beyond the bounds of God’s grace, whatever appearances might suggest that they have. “The Lord sends warnings to His people, not to destroy them, but to correct their errors. I have never been given the testimony to bear to any one, ‘You have committed the unpardonable sin.’ God never told any one to say to a fellow being, ‘You have committed the unpardonable sin.’”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, vol. 78, no. 31, July 30, 1901.

III. The Unpardonable Sin

We must be clear—no one particular act of violation of God’s law constitutes the unpardonable sin. The unpardonable sin is not a *single* offense or category of sin so heinous that it does not come within the pale of God’s pardoning love. Jesus declared that sinners guilty of “*all manner of sin*” (including murder and adultery—consider King David) are within the compass of His saving grace. Therefore, the unpardonable sin refers to a mind-set, an intransigent repudiation of God’s convicting and converting love. It is a fixed determination to regard the wooings of the Holy Spirit as a form of harassment or even as an accusing voice from Satan. Thus did the Pharisees who accused Christ of being Beelzebul. Judas, who linked himself in close association with Jesus, withdrew progressively (or, rather, regressively) from the Spirit of Christ because of his insistence on retaining his love of pride, wealth, and prestige.

“Wonderful had been the long-suffering of Jesus in His dealing with this tempted soul. Nothing that could be done to save Judas had been left undone. After he had twice covenanted to betray his Lord, Jesus still gave him opportunity for repentance. By reading the secret purpose of the traitor’s heart, Christ gave to Judas the

The Unpardonable Sin

Sin is fatal to our existence, but God delights to forgive us our sins. We need not perish, although “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (*Rom. 3:23*). Jesus died to earn the right to forgive repentant sinners.

But there is one sin that is unpardonable and inevitably results in eternal death. When someone refuses to respond to the goodness of God, which is designed to lead unto repentance (*Rom. 2:4*), this continued refusal to accept God’s overtures of grace will finally result in the commission of the unpardonable sin.

Read again Matthew 12:31 and Mark 3:29, in their respective contexts. How does this context reveal what’s being expressed in the above paragraph?

The unpardonable sin, or the sin against the Holy Spirit, is persistent rejection of light, the persistent rejection of what Christ has done for us. This rejection inevitably blinds the spiritual eyes and hardens the rejecter’s heart to the wooings of the Spirit, as the example of those leaders in Israel. Finally, there is utter darkness in the soul, and the person is eternally lost because he or she has ruined his or her soul’s perceptivity to the promptings of the Spirit.

Placing one’s self beyond the power of the Holy Spirit is “unpardonable” because we cannot even repent without the aid of the Spirit of God. God can’t do anything for us unless He forces us, which He won’t do. We have, through our own choices, cut ourselves off from salvation.

Read again Matthew 12:32 and Mark 3:29; notice how Jesus ties the unpardonable sin with the idea of speaking. Why, considering the above definition, would He do that?

In biblical thought, words are deemed as actions. Words are part of the reality they depict. God spoke, and the world came into existence (*Genesis 1*); Jesus Himself was the “Word . . . made flesh” (*John 1:14*). In the Hebrew, the most common term for “word” (*dabar*) also means “thing,” “history,” “prophecy,” and that’s because words are linked to the reality they refer to. Thus, it seems that Jesus equates speaking against the Holy Spirit as a persistent rejection of the truth the Spirit seeks to bring us. Actions and words are inseparably linked.

Think about the last time someone hurt you with words. That should show you that, indeed, words are “real” things. Make a covenant with God right now to guard carefully your tongue.

final, convincing evidence of His divinity. This was to the false disciple the last call to repentance. No appeal that the divine-human heart of Christ could make had been spared. The waves of mercy, beaten back by stubborn pride, returned in a stronger tide of subduing love. But although surprised and alarmed at the discovery of his guilt, Judas became only the more determined. From the sacramental supper he went out to complete the work of betrayal.” —Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 655. This typifies the character and conduct of those who commit the unpardonable sin in the face of divine mercy.

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Matthew 12:24-37, John 3:17-19, 1 Corinthians 2:8, Ephesians 4:30, 2 Timothy 3:7*

- 1 One reason Christ came to earth was to make it possible for us to have our sins forgiven. Why does the sin against the Holy Spirit seem to be an exception? How does a person sin against the Holy Spirit?
- 2 Many refer to the sin against the Holy Spirit as the “unpardonable sin.” Although this may be correct in some sense, why can it be confusing to refer to it as such? Is there really a sin God can’t—or won’t—forgive? How might the sin against the Holy Spirit have more to do with our willingness to seek forgiveness than with God’s ability or willingness to grant it?
- 3 Most sins are committed with some degree of knowing there will be consequences, even if one feels helpless to refrain from sinning. Is the same true of the sin against the Holy Spirit? For example, do you think the Pharisees, who refused to acknowledge evidence of Christ’s divinity, were aware of the consequences of this refusal? Or had they gradually allowed themselves to be lulled into spiritual unconsciousness?
- 4 How can other sins, while not in and of themselves unpardonable, lead one to commit the unpardonable sin?
- 5 A cynic once said, “It’s not a lie if you believe it.” If you are used to believing lies about yourself, reality, and God, you gradually lose the ability to recognize the truth. The Holy Spirit is there to guide us to the truth. Is it possible that one component of the sin against the Holy Spirit is to prefer our own comforting lies to the uncomfortable truth that the Holy Spirit presents to us?

Convictions of the Spirit

“When he [the Spirit] comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in me” (*John 16:8, 9, RSV*).

In order to qualify as a candidate for salvation, a person must recognize that he or she is a sinner. No person asks for help of the Savior unless sensing a need. One of our greatest needs is a personal conviction of sin. We cannot bring this conviction about ourselves; it is the Spirit’s prerogative and work to convict us of sin. His very first work is to make the sinner aware of his or her sinfulness and, hence, his or her lost condition. The Spirit is not merely the Comforter. He is also—and first—the Convictor of sin. He becomes the Comforter to those who have made peace with God by admitting and confessing their sins.

What dramatic illustration demonstrates the Spirit’s power to convince of sin? *Luke 19:8, 9*.

How did Jesus illustrate the availability of salvation for a contrite sinner, while at the same time pointing out the hopelessness of a person who thinks he or she is righteous? *Luke 18:10-14*.

“We must have a knowledge of ourselves, a knowledge that will result in contrition, before we can find pardon and peace. The Pharisee felt no conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit could not work with him. His soul was encased in a self-righteous armor which the arrows of God, barbed and true-aimed by angel hands, failed to penetrate. It is only he who knows himself to be a sinner that Christ can save.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 158.

When a person receives a vision of the righteousness and holiness of God, as did the prophet Isaiah (*Isa. 6:5, 6*), the Holy Spirit will convince that person that he or she is sinful and nothing but judgment and utter destruction will await him or her unless Jesus intervenes. Thus, it’s the convicting power of the Holy Spirit that’s so important in leading us to Christ. Imagine, then, the hopeless state of people who have, through their own hardness, made themselves immune to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

In what ways can guilt be good, a tool used by God? At the same time, at what point does guilt become bad, a tool used by the devil? How can we know the difference?

IV. Convictions of the Spirit

God's Spirit does not come to soothe and comfort us in our rebellion, but to soften and subdue our hearts in order that we might clearly perceive our sinfulness and accountability, and God's saving grace. If the processes Christ enumerated (*see John 16:7-15*) are bypassed or misconstrued, we set ourselves up for advanced delusions, including a false baptism of the Holy Spirit, full of sensation and excitement, but with no call to real holiness.

Let us be like David who prayed, "Who can understand *his* errors? Cleanse me from secret *faults*. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous *sins*; let them not have dominion over me. Then

Witnessing

Satan is working hard to trivialize one of the greatest cautions that the Christian receives from the heavenly Father: committing the unpardonable sin. How is Satan making a mockery of God's warning?

First, by obscuring the real meaning of the phrase, "unpardonable sin." When a spouse is unfaithful, is this an example of the unpardonable sin? No. While such an act is against God's law, and the outcome is extremely painful and hurtful for the offended spouse, the act itself does not constitute the unpardonable sin. Human accidents and adversity are not considered by God to be the unpardonable sin.

Second, the longer sin remains in place, the longer Satan has to rationalize to sinners that there is no real unpardonable sin; it's just smoke and mirrors, a ploy by God to frighten humankind into abandoning sin.

Finally, the most dangerous of Satan's maneuvering is his constant interference when the Holy Spirit is trying to reach an individual's heart and mind. Over time, it may become nearly impossible for an individual to be receptive to the Spirit's leading.

Ellen White gives strong warning on the expected outcome if an individual adamantly refuses to listen to the Holy Spirit. "The most common manifestation of the sin against the Holy Spirit is in persistently slighting Heaven's invitation to repent. Every step in the rejection of Christ is a step toward the rejection of salvation, and toward the sin against the Holy Spirit."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 324. "So long as one does this, he can find no hope or pardon, and he will finally lose all desire to be reconciled to God."—Page 325. Becoming desensitized and immune to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit will lead to the one sin that cannot be forgiven: the unpardonable sin. This is the sin that will deny the kingdom of heaven to someone for eternity. Let us pray fervently for ourselves and others that we will not resist the still, small voice of God.

Repentance and the Unpardonable Sin

At times, there have been church members who have lived in fear that they have committed the unpardonable sin. In a sense, it's not hard to understand why. We are sinners; if not moment by moment under the control of the Holy Spirit, we are capable of just about anything. And for a person who has known the Lord, who has gotten a glimpse of God's holiness, his or her own sense of sin can appear horribly damning and condemning. The guilt can be overwhelming. Most Christians, at some point in their walk with the Lord, have had moments of fear, moments of believing their case is hopeless, that they cannot make it, that they, in fact, may have committed the unpardonable sin.

If, however, the “unpardonable sin” is constant rejection of the Holy Spirit, why is someone who fears he or she has committed that sin, someone who clearly has not committed it? See also Ps. 51:1-4, Luke 5:8, 18:13.

The commission of crime or sin is no permanent obstacle to salvation. Jesus can save anyone who is willing to accept salvation. He is not primarily concerned with anyone's dismal past. Any sin and shortcoming may be blotted out through His shed blood. There is one condition for this forgiveness, and that is repentance, and that comes only from the work of the Holy Spirit. As long as we repent, there is forgiveness.

Of course, we must remember that sin cannot be trifled with. Each sin hardens us; every time we fall, we do so only because we have pushed away conviction. The more we do that, the easier it is to do it again and again and again. And though we can always repent and find forgiveness, the more we sin, the more we harden our hearts to the very Person who leads us to repentance, the Holy Spirit.

Thus, how crucial that we, each day, claim the power of God to cleanse us, to regenerate us, to remake us in the image of the Savior. (See 1 Cor. 10:13, Gal. 5:16, Titus 3:5.)

Have you ever felt your case was hopeless, that you were going to be lost even after you had made a decision to follow Christ? What brought those feelings? What caused them finally to leave? What did you learn from that experience that you could use to help someone who feels his or her case is hopeless?

shall I be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression” (*Ps. 19:12, 13, italics supplied*). David also understood that God instructs the conscience by applying His law as the test of our motives, words, and actions. (*See Psalms 19:7-12; 94:11, 12; 139:23, 24.*)

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Have you ever had a door slammed in your face? How did it feel? Why do you think this happened to you? Share your experience in class. Read Matthew 12:22-31 aloud together. What was happening in the different characters’ hearts: the demon-possessed man, the people, the Pharisees? In what ways are we like each of these individuals?

Thought Questions:

❶ Using a concordance, look up how the words *reject*, *rebel*, and *refuse* are used in Scripture. Discuss a few of the passages and the characters that are depicted. How would you describe the lesson being taught? How are the attitudes embodied by these words different from what is portrayed in John 3:14-16? In what ways might these lessons be applied to your life?

❷ As elections in many countries draw near, common rhetoric may intensify. Each candidate often depicts the other as inept, even hostile, toward the people they would be serving. How is this similar to what Satan does with humanity? How do we ignore his accusations in favor of the Scriptures’ affirmations? Make a list of scriptures that encourage and support the good news of salvation. Start with 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Hebrews 2:9.

Application Question:

“ ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’ ” (*Luke 18:13, NIV*). What is positive about this desperate cry? Take a moment to read Luke 18:10-14. Sin, displayed against the backdrop of the goodness of God, is dangerously ugly. When we see it in ourselves, we fear it will cause God to reject us. Ask the Holy Spirit to heal your despair by leading you to the words of assurance found in Scripture (*see Lam. 3:21-25, Heb. 13:5b*). Then share your newfound hope with a friend or work associate who is struggling.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 621, 622; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 321–324, 565–568; *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 75, 76; *Christ’s Object Lessons*, “Two Worshipers,” pp. 150–152.

“He who rejects the work of the Holy Spirit is placing himself where repentance and faith cannot come to him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 322.

“Every impure thought defiles the soul, impairs the moral sense, and tends to obliterate the impressions of the Holy Spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 302.

“But if a man, by repeated refusals of God’s guidance, has lost the ability to recognize goodness when he sees it, if he has got his moral values inverted until evil to him is good and good to him is evil, then, even when he is confronted by Jesus, he is conscious of no sin he cannot repent and therefore he can never be forgiven. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit.”—William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 81.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, imagine if you had to deal with someone who was convinced he or she had committed the unpardonable sin. What have you learned from this week’s study you could use to help that person find hope and forgiveness?
- 2 As a class, go through the Bible and see what examples you can find of those who, apparently, had committed the unpardonable sin. Make a list of these people and discuss their specific cases.
- 3 Read over the above quote from Barclay. What’s the process he is describing? Why is this a danger for everyone, even professed Christians?
- 4 As a class, pray together that each one will be more surrendered to the workings of the Holy Spirit.