

The Unpardonable Sin

INTRODUCTION

A. In today's world – Many saved and unsaved people today are misled about or just misunderstand “the unpardonable sin” – the sin God won’t forgive. Various interpretations and explanations have been given as to what the Bible says about it. In some churches it seems to be taken (erroneously) as abortion, divorce, or even disagreement with the pastor (what he says or does).

B. Under the Law of Moses, not all sins could be forgiven. Those that sinned presumptuously (rather than ignorantly) would not be forgiven. (Num 15:30-31) Historically, because Eli’s sons “made themselves vile, and he restrained them not,” God declared “the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever.” (1Sa 3:14)

C. Jesus in the Gospels likewise mentioned sin that would not be forgiven. It is commonly called “the unpardonable sin.”

1. Many people minimize their sins; they are not concerned about their sins. They think that there’s no God who would be so unkind as to eternally punish anyone (but especially them) for sins.
2. Others think their sins aren’t so bad after all – and their good works can make up for sins.
3. A few are convinced their sins are so bad or so many that they can’t be forgiven.
4. Some, knowing their need for forgiveness, have trusted in Jesus and His shed blood.
5. Then some think that they have committed unpardonable sin. This study will deal with this last idea – the sin to which Jesus referred that would not be forgiven or pardoned.

I. The passages that express this sin – This sin is mentioned only in the three Synoptic Gospels – never in the Epistles. Some passages not in the Gospels have been thought to refer to this sin (e.g., Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 1Jn 5:16-17), but these passages seem to be definitely discussing different situations.

A. Matthew 12:31-32 – “Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come.”

B. Mark 3:28-30 – “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. Because they said, ‘He hath an unclean spirit.’”

C. Luke 12:10 – “Whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven.”

II. Some proposals to explain this sin – A number of ideas have been put forward to explain what the unpardonable sin actually is. These will be presented before examining the evidence in Scripture.

A. A possible sin now – A popular view among Evangelicals is that it is the sin of unbelief that unbelievers carry to the grave; it is unpardonable because no sins can be forgiven after death. Charles Spurgeon linked the unpardonable sin to a permanently seared conscience: “Hardened [sinners] never repent, and consequently are never forgiven.” G. Campbell Morgan (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1939, p. 132) defined this sin as the “wilful, personal, final rejection of the Spirit’s testimony, by words of the mouth, which express the decision of the heart.” As phrased by Henry Clarence Thiessen (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 1949, p. 270), “Final obduracy is the sin against the Holy Spirit and

is unpardonable, because the soul through it has ceased to be receptive of divine influence (Matt. 12:31,32; Mark 3:29; I John 5:16,17; Heb. 10:26).” Others who have held this view include George W. Arms, J. Sidlow Baxter, W.A. Criswell, Jerry Falwell, David Jeremiah, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Alva J. McClain, J. Vernon McGee, D.L. Moody, John R. Rice, Stephen F. Olford, and John Stott.

B. An historical sin then – Many scholars differ with the former view and hold that a literal understanding of the Bible demands that we see the unpardonable as a sin that could not take place today.

(1) Personal sin

(a) In the Gospel era (during Jesus’ earthly ministry) – C. I. Scofield, (*Dr. C. I. Scofield’s Question Box*, 1917, p. 152) defined the sin as “ascribing to Satanic power, rather than to that of the Holy Spirit, the works of Christ” (similarly William Pettingill, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, n.d., pp. 150-51). Louis Berkhof (in his *Systematic Theology*, 1939, pp. 252-53) cites two Church Fathers that held this view (but he himself rejects it): “Jerome and Chrysostom thought of it as a sin that could be committed only during Christ’s sojourn on earth and that it was committed by those who were convinced in their hearts that Christ performed His miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, but in spite of their conviction refused to recognize these miracles as such and ascribed them to the operation of Satan.” Lewis S. Chafer says (*Systematic Theology*, publ 1947, p. 237) “The possibility of this particular sin being committed ceased with Christ’s removal from the earth.”

Another theologian put it this way: “He [Jesus] meant that though they might misunderstand His claims, such ignorance, though deplorable, was forgivable. But **to misunderstand the power of the Spirit was unforgivable** since the Spirit’s power and ministry was well known from Old Testament times.... To commit this particular sin required the personal and visible presence of Christ on earth; to commit it today, therefore, would be impossible. But to show wickedness of heart is unpardonable in any day if one dies persisting in his or her rejection of Christ. A person’s eternal destiny is determined in this life, but **no sin is unpardonable as long as a person has breath.**” (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 1986, p. 352 – my emphases)

(b) In the Pentecostal era – A. H. Strong says “... the unpardonable sin is a sin committed against the Holy Spirit rather than against Christ.... Jesus warns the Jews against it, – he does not say they had already committed it. They would seem to have committed it when, after Pentecost, they added to their rejection of Christ the rejection of the Holy Spirit’s witness to Christ’s resurrection” (*Systematic Theology*, 1907, p. 652). Similarly, Otto Proksch (“Agios in the NT,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1963, 1:104), states that “sin against the Son of Man is committed in ignorance and may be pardoned.... The possibility of this sin [“the sin against the Holy Ghost”] thus arises with the Pentecostal era when the Holy Spirit has been poured out by Jesus on the disciples.”

Likewise, G. M. Burge (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1017) believes this sin does not refer to a particular act; “it is a disposition of the will.” He argues that “the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry was a time of ambiguity *even for the disciples* (Mark 9:30-31), and that “in the post-Easter setting, the presence of the Spirit and the presence of Jesus were rarely distinguishable (II Cor 3:18; cf. Acts 16:7). This was a time of Spirit-inspired understanding (John 12:16; 13:7; 16:12-13; cf. I Cor 2:1-16); apostasy against the Son would have similarly dire consequences (Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31; cf. I John 5:10, 14ff).... The unpardonable sin refers to complete apostasy (Calvin).”

(2) **National sin** – This view further develops the previous one by agreeing that the unpardonable sin was not committed during the Gospel period of Jesus’ earthly life – and cannot be committed now – but was during the post-Pentecost period (covered by the Book of Acts). It takes it slightly differently, though, in seeing this as a national sin of Israel in their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah (Ac 7:46-56; 18:5,6). According to John Nelson Darby (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 1857-62, on Mt 12), “He [Jesus] could pardon all sin; but to speak against and blaspheme the Holy Ghost (that is, to acknowledge the exercise of a power, which is that of God, and to attribute it to Satan) could not be pardoned; for the Pharisees admitted that the devil was cast out, and it was only with malice, with

open-eyed deliberate hatred to God, that they attributed it to Satan. And what pardon could there be for this? There was none either in the age of the law or in that of the Messiah. The fate of those who thus acted was decided. This the Lord would have them understand. The fruit proved the nature of the tree. It was essentially bad. They were a generation of vipers.”

William Kelly – associate of Samuel Tregelles as well as J. N. Darby (whose *Collected Writings* he edited) – said this: “The unbelief that refused the testimony of the Spirit, when Jesus was there, would be even stronger against it on His departure.... They would be guilty of the unpardonable sin.... it is the final rejection of the Spirit’s testimony to Christ. It was true when our Lord was here, but it is still more complete now that He is in heaven.... He who refuses all divine testimony, and makes the displayed power of the Holy Ghost the occasion of shewing [sic] his spite against Jesus, is evidently lost for ever: he bears the unmistakable stamp of perdition upon his brow. This was exactly the sin into which Israel were fast falling. The Holy Spirit might be sent down, and work even greater acts of power than the Lord Himself had done; it made no change in their heart. The unbelieving race of Israel shall be forgiven, neither in this “age,” nor in that which is to come.... The age to come is that wherein the children of Israel are to be under the Messiah’s rule.... Such was the growing danger of Israel.” (William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1868/1896, p. 270).

More recently, Cornelius R. Stam (*Acts Dispensationally Considered*, 1954, p. 239) wrote: “When our Lord warned Israel’s leaders that sin and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven them it was simply because the Holy Spirit was soon to descend and give them their third and last opportunity to repent. And after all their sin and blasphemy against the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit *did* come down at Pentecost, working among them so mightily and confronting them with such overwhelming proof of our Lord’s kingdom rights that their continued rejection of Him was utterly inexcusable and unpardonable.” He went on to point out “the three brutal murders around which all history revolves” as “God’s three-fold call to repentance” – their guilt increasing from one to another: the Jews 1) **permitting** the beheading of John the Baptist, 2) **demanding** the crucifixion of Jesus, and 3) **committing** the stoning of Stephen – and then concluded by saying “so that generation in Israel committed the unpardonable sin which our Lord warned would not be forgiven, either in that age, or in the age to come” (“the coming kingdom age” he explained in a footnote, *ibid.*, pp. 239-40).

Others who hold this view include J. C. O’Hair (“Who Committed the Unpardonable Sin?”), Charles F. Baker (*A Dispensational Theology*, 1971, pp. 275-76), and Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum (“Israelology, Part 6 of 6,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal*, 6:3 [Summer 2000])

III. The particulars that explicate this sin – What indications can we find that will point us to one of the above possible explanations as being the best?

A. The apparent sin – It is very understandable to see that, from the literal words Jesus used to describe the unpardonable sin, one could assume that it must be a verbal, audible sin – one that somehow includes or involves the blasphemy (speaking against) the Holy Spirit. In fact, Jesus’ declarations about this sin (Mt 12:31-32) follow closely upon the Pharisees **saying** that “this fellow [Jesus] doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils” (Mt 12:24; cf. 9:34; Lk 11:15) and are explained in Mark by his writing that “because they **said**, ‘He hath an unclean spirit.’” (Mk 3:30, my emphasis). Right after Jesus said “All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men” (Mt 12:31) He added what seems to be the same truth stated in slightly different words: “And whosoever **speakeeth** a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever **speakeeth** against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.” (Mt 12:32 my emphasis)

So, what, in actuality, is involved in this sin? The proposed views mentioned above all profess to explain the sin – but **NONE** of them includes someone actually verbally blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Why? Well, the evidence of Scripture does not justify it. In none of the three Gospel accounts do the Pharisees even name the Holy Spirit – much less literally “speak against” Him. What led to Jesus’ statement about the unpardonable sin (Mt 12:30-32) is the Pharisees’ declaration in vers 24 that “This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.” Interesting is the fact that the very next verse (25) does not say Jesus heard or knew what they said; no, “Jesus knew their **thoughts**.”

It is true that nowhere does Scripture record anyone literally blaspheming or speaking against the Holy Spirit. Could it be that the idea of “blasphemy of the Spirit” should not necessarily be taken to mean literal, audible blasphemy? It would seem that Jesus was referring to something deeper than spoken words – that, perhaps, words don’t have to be spoken out loud at all – or, at least, that naming the Holy Spirit is not essential to sinning against Him (and His work in the world).

B. The absent sin – The sin Jesus characterized as unpardonable is never mentioned outside the Synoptic Gospels (Mt, Mk, & Lk). None of the other NT writers refer to it in any way – recollection, quotation, allusion, instruction, correction, or prohibition. This is strong indication that this sin could not and would not be committed by believers – or perhaps by anyone – after the Church began during Acts.

C. The anticipated sin – It is specifically labeled by Jesus as sin against the Holy Spirit. The question arises as to why a sin against Jesus is forgivable but not one (this one) against the Holy Spirit. Jesus did not say that the sin had been committed yet – that the Pharisees actually committed this sin by attributing Jesus’ miracles to Beelzebub (rather than to the power of the Holy Spirit). If it is true that (as many others have pointed out) in Old Testament times Israel sinned against the Father, and during Jesus’ time on earth they sinned against the Son (which Jesus says was forgivable and which – on the cross – He evidently asked God to forgive – Lk 23:34), then it seems likely that this sin would take place after the Incarnation – and, perhaps, that it would indicate a higher (more incriminating) level of sin by Israel. It may be that Jesus was warning of a future (an anticipated) sin that could be – and would be – committed.

D. The advancing sin – Did the time in which the unpardonable sin could be committed overlap two ages – commencing in one (“this age”) and concluding in another (“the coming one”) – from Jesus’ earthly life to the Pentecostal age? Was it just the lack of forgiveness that overlapped two eons of time?

1. An age of time – Jesus said that the unpardonable sin would not be forgiven “neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come.” The key Greek word here – rendered “world” – is *aion* (used only once in the verse) and refers mainly to time, not state – an eon or era or age, not a cosmos or world or universe. The literal translation should be “neither in this age nor in the coming one.” (Darby translation) In fact, *aion* also occurs in Mark’s record of this sin (3:29) – where it is translated “eternal.”

2. Bible ages – Clearly, Jesus distinguished two eras of time – one when He was on earth and one later. We know that, according to the Bible, history can be divided into various time periods. When the Bible was put together it became the Old Testament and the New Testament. That, of course, is a very general (and sometimes misleading) division – which stemmed, of course, from the books written about and after Jesus’ life being added to the earlier Jewish Scriptures. Seeing history from the perspective of God’s dealings with Israel would lead to three divisions – namely, pre-Law, Law, and post-Law. Even within those three periods of time one can make further subdivisions (some scholars having a dozen or more divisions – often termed dispensations).

3. “This age” – Jesus’ earthly life was a small segment of the over 1500 years the Law was in force. Jesus contrasted “this age” with “the coming one.” It is unclear whether He used “this age” to refer to the whole period of the Law or more restrictedly to His own time on earth. From Jesus’ contrast between sinning against Him and sinning against the Holy Spirit it would seem most likely that Jesus was referring specifically to His time on earth. Was it that this sin could be committed in both “this age” and “the coming one” – or that it could not be forgiven in either one?

4. “The coming” age – What did Jesus mean by “the coming” age – e.g., (1) eternity,

(2) all future time after the Messiah returns to reign, (3) the Millennium, or (4) the whole Church age? Perhaps He was simply referring specifically to the time period that began **right after** His Incarnation – time covered by the Book of Acts (or part of it). The post-Pentecost period certainly was an age that evidenced the Holy Spirit's activity – with His empowering the Apostles (Ac 1:8) to do even greater works than Jesus did (Jn 14:12) and His baptizing believers into the Body of Christ (1Co 12:13).

E. The appalling sin – Sin has always brought judgment and punishment to individuals and groups.

1. What happened in Acts – Luke records in Acts that 3,000 responded in belief to Peter's preaching on Pentecost (Ac 2:41), that another 5,000 men believed (Ac 4:4), and that "by the hands of the apostles were **many signs and wonders** wrought among the people." (Ac 5:12) Nevertheless, Israel's religious leaders kept rejecting the witness of the Apostles and of the Holy Spirit (Ac 5:32) and forbade the Apostles' preaching (Ac 4:18; 5:40), and threatened (Ac 4:17,21) and arrested and imprisoned them (Ac 4:3; 5:18).

Soon thereafter some synagogue Jews heard Stephen preaching. They managed to get some men to say "We have heard him **speak blasphemous words** against Moses and God." (Ac 6:11) A crowd of Jews took him to the Sanhedrin and got more false witnesses to say "This man ceaseth not to **speak blasphemous words** against this holy place and the law." (Ac 7:13) In his defense Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin that because of ancient Israel's sin, God made them wander in the wilderness 40 years and then later caused them to be taken captive to foreign lands, and ended with this: "**Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost, as your fathers did**" (Ac 7:51). Israel's religious leaders then stoned Stephen to death.

Later, Paul attempted to evangelize Jews as well as Gentiles, but the Jews kept rejecting the gospel, so Paul turned three times to concentrate on the Gentiles (Ac 13:46; 18:6; 28:28). Not long after the history in Acts ends, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. This would seem to indicate God's punishment for Israel's sin. He set the nation aside for the rest of this age of grace. The unpardonable sin for Israel had occurred, and God's appropriate punishment ended the Jewish state.

2. What happened in history

What happened then is similar to how God has dealt with humanity (or a portion of it) through all history. At various stages – when humans failed God's requirements – God intervened in judgment. Remember the one thing that got Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden? The one sin was eating of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Once sins developed to a certain point God intervened again by sending the Flood and saving only eight humans. The period of the patriarchs ended with slavery in Egypt when Israel failed to trust God in the Promised Land. The great sin of Israel's idolatry resulted in the exile and captivities of the northern (722 B.C.) and southern (586 B.C.) kingdoms. In the future God will bring about all the woes and suffering of the Tribulation after most of mankind rejects His wonderful grace during the current Church Age. Just so, God determined that Israel's rejecting of the Holy Spirit's testimony and miracles to Jesus' Messiahship would result in the destruction of their temple and their capital city and their dispersion throughout the world. God could have pardoned His chosen earthly people, but His plan said otherwise.

CONCLUSIONS – The "unpardonable sin" can be characterized in the following ways:

A. Unpardonable – This sin is such that God **would** not forgive it – not that He **could** not.

B. Historical – Jesus did not specifically say that anyone had committed this sin yet; it seems it was committed later – or committed in its fulness – in the period of the Acts of the Apostles.

C. National – It was committed by Israel in their rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit in His testifying by signs and wonders in Acts to Jesus' deity, Messiahship, redemption, and resurrection.

D. Dispensational – The Jews' rejection of the Holy Spirit's testimony to Jesus' Messiahship permanently ended the Law and temporarily ended the Jewish state and occupancy of the Promised Land.

E. Not personal – No believer today can commit it; ALL our sins were forgiven (paid for) at Calvary. ALL unbelievers' sins are forgivable if they trust Christ before death – certainly not after death.