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The Unpardonable Sin

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God is a forgiving God. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for our sins and offer forgiveness. Therefore, it may seem surprising to discover that the Bible describes a sin that's unforgivable. Of course, not all sins are ultimately forgiven. Those who reject Jesus Christ continue in their sinful condition and will do so throughout eternity. Still, there is one sin that stretches beyond forgiveness. This "unpardonable sin" is described in several passages of the New Testament and presents an interpretive challenge to students of God's Word.

Texts, Context, and Observations

The New Testament references to an unpardonable sin are found in Jesus' statements in two parallel accounts (Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-29) and a distinct account (Luke 12:10). The context of the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark involve an accusation on the part of Jesus' opponents attributing to Satan Jesus' ability to cast out demons. Jesus clearly had power over demons. Did His power come from God or from Satan? Jesus warned those who attributed His power to Satan that they were thereby blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This constituted an unpardonable sin.

In order to arrive at a proper interpretation of Jesus' words, the following observations must be taken into account. First, Jesus identified the Holy Spirit as the source of His power to cast out demons (Matthew 12:28). Second, Jesus drew a sharp distinction between those who are with Him and those who are against Him (Matthew 12:30). Third, Jesus describes the unforgivable sin as consisting of "blasphemy" against the Holy Spirit, that is, speaking against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:29). Fourth, Jesus warns that anyone guilty of committing the unpardonable sin will not be forgiven "in this age or in the age to come," indicating that the penalty for this sin isn't limited to the next life (Matthew 12:32). Finally, Jesus warned that anyone who commits the unpardonable sin is guilty of an "eternal sin" (or, according to many Greek manuscripts, and "eternal judgment"), indicating that the penalty for this sin does encompass the next life.

Four Views of the Unpardonable Sin

Bible scholars who have attempted to explain the nature of the unpardonable sin within its context have arrived at four distinct views. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

The first view interprets the unpardonable sin as a lifelong rejection of the Holy Spirit's convicting work in the heart that ultimately results in eternal condemnation. Those who don't place their faith in Jesus Christ by the end of their lifetime have thereby committed the unpardonable sin. This view allows for the commission of the unpardonable sin today and accounts for the gospel invitation that invites "whosoever will" to find forgiveness in this lifetime. However, this view fails to account for Jesus' statement that those who commit the unpardonable sin will have no forgiveness "in this age" (Matthew 12:32).

The second view interprets the unpardonable sin as attributing the miraculous works of Jesus while He was on earth to the power of Satan. This sin was a historical reality but has no application to

people today since Jesus is no longer physically present. Ryrie states, “To commit this particular sin required the personal and visible presence of Christ on earth; to commit it today, therefore, would be impossible.”¹ Ancient writers such as Jerome and Chrysostom supported this view.² This view defends the idea of a “whosoever will” gospel appeal, as Chafer points out: “But even more emphatically it is to be declared that the so-called unpardonable sin cannot be present where there is a ‘whosoever will’ gospel being preached, else reservations must be made to the effect that a ‘whosoever will’ gospel must except those who have committed an unpardonable sin.”³ However, Jesus extended a “whosoever will” invitation even during His earthly lifetime (John 7:37-38).

The third view interprets the unpardonable sin to be a national rather than an individual sin. It reflected historically the nation of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as its Messiah. Based on this view, it would be impossible to commit the unpardonable sin today. Pentecost represents this view: “Christ was warning that generation in Israel that if they rejected the Father’s testimony and the Spirit’s testimony to His person and His work, there was to be no further evidence that could be given. . . . This sin, then, was not viewed as the sin of an individual but rather as the sin of the nation, and this sin brought that whole generation under divine judgment.”⁴ However, Jesus stated that “anyone,” not “any nation,” who speaks against the Holy Spirit forfeits forgiveness (Matthew 12:32), implying a personal, individual sin.

A fourth view interprets the unpardonable sin to be a conscious, informed, intentional rejection of the Holy Spirit’s convicting work concerning Jesus Christ that leads to irreversible hardness of heart. According to this view, people today can commit the unpardonable sin. Pharaoh’s hardness of heart, as well as the sin of Judas Iscariot, might serve as examples of such sin. Berkhof states, “It is evidently a sin committed during the present life, which makes conversion and pardon impossible. The sin consists in the

conscious, malicious, and willful rejection and slandering, against evidence and conviction, of the testimony of the Holy Spirit respecting the grace of God in Christ, attributing it out of hatred and enmity to the prince of darkness.”⁵ While each view has its difficulties, this view seems most consistent with the observations from the biblical texts.

A Practical Conclusion

If indeed the unpardonable sin is an informed and irreversible rejection of the Holy Spirit’s convicting work, a sin that can be committed in this day and age, it’s important to state two observations. First, those who fear they’ve committed this sin, by the very nature of their spiritual sensitivity, can be confident that God will forgive any sin they’ve committed through faith in Jesus Christ. Second, no Christian should restrict his or her witness toward individuals because of suspicions of hardness of heart. “Only God knows if and when any ‘deadline’ has been crossed. You and I must never despair of any sinner.”⁶

¹ Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986, p. 352.

² Berkhof, L. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941, p. 252.

³ Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology*. Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948, vol. VII, p. 48.

⁴ Pentecost, J. Dwight. *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 207.

⁵ Berkhof, p. 253.

⁶ Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989, vol. 1, p. 122.