

Have You Committed the Unforgivable Sin of Blasphemy?

Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-35

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As her health rapidly declined and with tears in her eyes, an aged woman confessed, "Pastor, I fear that as a young woman I committed the sin of blasphemy. Is there any hope that I can be forgiven?"

A man approached me at the YMCA one day. We knew each other only by first names, but he knew I was a pastor. He was contemplating ending his life and wanted to know if suicide was the unforgivable sin.

A student was home from college for spring break. He dropped by the church. I could tell he wanted to talk. Apparently he had engaged pretty heavily in the party atmosphere of the college. Things had gotten out of hand one weekend, and he was afraid he had committed an unforgivable sin.

Is there a sin for which there is no forgiveness? Is God willing to forgive all sins except the one identified in our text from Mark 3?

Here's what Jesus said:

Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

This passage, as you can imagine, has caused tremendous emotional and spiritual turmoil for people. Some have given up hope. Some have approached their death consumed with fear and anxiety. So today I want to try to answer three very important questions. What is this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Why is it unforgivable? And is it possible that you or I have committed this unforgivable sin?

Here's the setting. Mark says that Jesus was at home, perhaps with his mother and brothers. A large crowd had gathered. You may

remember that Jesus had angered a group of religious leaders in Jerusalem, the Sabbath Police, I called them last Sunday. With their eyes bearing down upon him, Jesus healed a man with a crippled hand on the Sabbath. “Can’t do that!” they said to Jesus. “That is a violation of Sabbath law.” Mark notes that that was the moment these religious leaders began planning how to destroy Jesus.

Some of these religious leaders followed Jesus to his home. Troublemakers, they were. Trying to undermine Jesus. Trying to plant seeds of doubt among his followers. Trying to destroy him. This is what they told the crowd about Jesus:

He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.

Beelzebul is another name for the devil. Beelzebub is a variant and means “lord of the flies,” the title of William Golding’s classic novel. These religious leaders saw Jesus performing miracles. There was no doubt that miraculous things were occurring. But instead of attributing that to the power of God in Jesus’ life, they attributed it to Beelzebul, the devil. Jesus, they told his crowd of his followers, was exercising satanic powers.

Jesus challenged them, of course, asking how Satan could cast out Satan. Their charge was simply counter intuitive. It just didn’t make sense.

I wonder if Jesus then turned his attention to the crowd instead of the religious leaders. Perhaps with a wave of his arm toward the religious leaders, Jesus told his followers,

Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

Mark then adds this, “For they (the religious leaders) said, ‘He (Jesus) has an unclean spirit.’”

So first question: what is this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? It is to recognize the power of God in Jesus' life—the healings and other miracles—and then call that power evil or of the devil. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit meant to see what Jesus was doing and charge that Beelzebul possessed him, that the source of his power was Satan rather than the Holy Spirit.

Now I want to point out something that is very important to interpreting this passage. It's grammatical and gets technical, so hang with me. This is important. It's in verse thirty. The verb there is in the imperfect tense, which we don't have in English. Spanish has the imperfect tense, French does, and others languages do. Greek does. Here's how an imperfect verb acts. It combines past tense with repetitive, ongoing behavior. They didn't do it just one time in the past. It was ongoing behavior, continuous behavior, in the past.

Now I want to compare two translations of verse thirty. The first is my translation, the New Revised Standard Version. I read from this every Sunday. It reads, "For they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" That is simple past tense, not imperfect tense.

Here's the New International Version. Some of you use this translation. "He said this because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'" That's a better translation. "They were saying" suggests ongoing, continuous behavior.

What Mark is describing here is repeated, habitual action that came out of a firm decision. This was not mere skepticism or doubt about Jesus. These religious leaders had driven down a stake. Over and over and over they rejected the evidence that God was at work in Jesus. "That's not God at work in him," they said. "It's Beelzebul." That is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. (Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation*, Mark, p. 86)

Second question: why is that sin unforgivable? Remember, Jesus was directing this statement to men who had already determined to destroy him. They had traveled from Jerusalem with that intent. They were trying to convince the crowds that were following Jesus that Jesus was actually satanic, that his power came from Beelzebul, not the Holy

Spirit. These men had driven down a stake, over against what God was doing. They had cut themselves off from the source of forgiveness. It's not that God was unwilling to forgive them; they were unwilling to receive forgiveness. They made it unforgivable.

Now, the third and most important question: is it possible that you or I have committed this unforgivable sin? If you are concerned about this, if you have anxiety about whether you have committed an unforgivable sin, that very concern is evidence that you have not done so. Remember that imperfect tense. It was repeated, habitual action that came out of a firm decision. It was not an accident. It was not a wild weekend at college. These religious leaders drove down a stake. They didn't care. If you care, that is evidence that you have not committed the sin of blasphemy.

Remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector? They both went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood off by himself, puffed up his chest, and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He went on to tell God how wonderful he was.

But not the tax collector. He stood far off. He couldn't even look up. Instead he bowed his head, beat his breast, and prayed, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Pray like that tax collector. Every day. Just pray like that tax collector, and you will never have to fear that you have committed the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Closing Prayer

Lord, do be merciful to us all, sinners humbled before you. Amen.