

What is the Unpardonable Sin?

Matthew 12:31-32

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This morning I want to deal with a passage that I think is one of the most difficult and troubling passages in all the recorded teachings of Jesus. It's the passage in Matthew 12 where our Lord speaks of the unpardonable sin. Every time we do a Q&A, someone will ask about the unpardonable sin. What is it?; how do you know if someone has committed it? Is it something that can be done unintentionally? and other questions.

In a Q&A session, there's never enough time to cover the subject in depth, so beginning today, I want to take three sessions to look at what Jesus meant when He spoke in Matthew 12 about the one sin that **"will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come"** (v. 32).

Back in December of 2006 a group of spiritual scoundrels calling themselves "The Rational Response Squad" began ridiculous campaign on the Internet to encourage people to commit the unpardonable sin intentionally. This was a group of angry, postmodern atheist zealots who despised the very idea of God and decided to deliberately thumb their noses at the idea of any blasphemy so base and so intentional that it can never be forgiven. So they announced what they called

"The Blasphemy Challenge." You may have seen their campaign, because it went viral at the time, and it was covered pretty thoroughly by the national media in early 2007. The atheist group promised a free DVD full of atheist propaganda to anyone who took the challenge. Here's an excerpt from the website they posted:

The Rational Response Squad is giving away 1001 DVDs

...

There's only one catch: We want your soul.

It's simple. You record a short message damning yourself to Hell, you upload it to YouTube, and then the Rational Response Squad will send you a free . . . *DVD*. It's that easy.

INSTRUCTIONS:

You may damn yourself to Hell however you would like, but somewhere in your video you must say this phrase: "I deny the Holy Spirit."

Why? Because, according to Mark 3:29 in the Holy Bible, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin." Jesus will forgive you for just about anything, but he won't forgive you for denying the existence of the Holy Spirit. Ever.

This is a one-way road you're taking here.

Hundreds of people responded to that challenge, and for awhile, Youtube was teeming with videos where people were denying the Holy Spirit. They even managed persuade a few

celebrities to participate. Penn Gillette and Christopher Hitchens made videos. But most of the people who posted videos in response to this challenge were young people not even yet out of their teens. Some were articulate and purposeful, some were just doing what they perceived to be the latest "cool" thing—selling their souls to atheism and sacrilege and then sealing the deal with an oath against God.

In the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the "Rational Response Team's" website, this question is raised: *"Is it true that you are targeting young people with this campaign?"* Their answer: **"Yes. As young people are the most vulnerable to religious indoctrination, we feel it is important to reach them with the concept of challenging the doctrine they are told to unquestioningly believe."** Apparently they think manmade atheistic dogma is inherently superior to divine revelation.

Anyway, hundreds of these blasphemy videos are still there on YouTube, and it is heartbreaking to watch them. Some of them feature faces that seem to reflect a kind of innocent gullibility; others show an overt and deliberate contempt for Christ and His lordship. Some reveal little understanding of the Bible and its claims; others freely testify that they grew up in and around the church and profess to understand exactly what they are doing. Some seem merely naive; others appear to be overtly evil.

I've never seen a more appallingly ignorant campaign carried out in the name of reason and knowledge.

Have these people actually committed an unpardonable offense by making a verbal profession of denial towards the Holy Spirit? More to the point, what, exactly, is the sin Jesus called unpardonable, and how does a person know if he or she is guilty of it? That's a question that frequently comes up in evangelism or in counseling situations. From time to time I even hear from long-time church members, professing Christians, who are fearful that they might have committed an unpardonable sin.

Matthew 12 is the chapter where this issue is dealt with most thoroughly. Turn there with me. The two key verses that specifically mention the unpardonable sin are Matthew 12:31-32. This is Jesus speaking—and let's acknowledge at the outset that these are urgent and frightening words of solemn caution. Jesus says:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Let me start by saying once more with emphasis: it is right to take Jesus' warning seriously. There's a fearful finality in

those words: "**whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.**" If you don't come to a passage like *that* with the utmost sobriety and a trembling heart, then I frankly wonder whether you understand what it means to believe the Word of God. This was a warning designed to provoke holy fear—the *terror* of the Lord—which Scripture says repeatedly is "**the beginning of wisdom.**"

Now this morning (and for our next two sessions together), I want to look at this passage and its immediate context. We'll also observe the passages in Mark and Luke that parallel this one so that you can see precisely what was going on here. It's important to hear what Jesus was saying in its historical context—so this may be a little longer introduction than you're accustomed to from me. And then we'll outline three characteristics of the unpardonable sin which reveal its true nature.

I think this study will be a comfort to true believers, and I hope it will provoke holy fear in any unbelievers who might be listening. But either way, when we're done, I believe you'll have a better grasp of what the unpardonable sin is and why Jesus spoke of it at this particular point in His ministry.

In order to see the immediate context, we need to back up a bit to the beginning of this chapter, Matthew 12. The unifying theme that ties Matthew 12 together is the malice of

the Pharisees against Christ. The chapter records a series of acrimonious conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees purposely provoked each of these conflicts. Matthew describes how they followed Him around, looking for opportunities to accuse Him.

In the first incident Matthew describes here (vv. 1-8), they criticized the disciples for plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. Verse 2, they say: "**Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.**" But they were dead wrong. The Old Testament prohibited *work* on the Sabbath—doing business to earn a profit or engaging in pastimes that distracted from the spiritual significance of entering into the Lord's Sabbath rest. There was no restriction against plucking heads of grain to eat. But the Pharisees, in their zeal to seem super-spiritual in the eyes of other people, had amplified and added to the Old Testament law, so that they forbade *activity* of any kind—including the casual gleaning of grain for a simple snack as you walked through a field. They took the Sabbath, which was designed to be a day of rest and delight for people, and they made it into a drudgery of quasi-spiritual tedium that—far from being restful and delightful, was wearisome to people.

Notice: in verse 7 Jesus rebukes them for "**condemn[ing] the guiltless.**" Jesus was saying these Pharisees were an abomination in the eyes of God, because Proverbs 17:15 says, "**He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the**

righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD." Jesus never pulls any punches or softens his criticism of the Pharisees. He isn't bound by the postmodern rule that says you have to negate every criticism with an even more positive statement about whoever you are criticizing. He doesn't commend them for their zeal or congratulate them for their desire to obey the law better than anyone else. He is just bluntly honest with them. He tells them they are guilty of condemning the innocent, which makes them *abominable* in the judgment of God.

Then Jesus leaves that place (v. 9): "**He went on from there and entered their synagogue.**" Inside the synagogue was a man who needed healing, with a withered, useless, probably paralyzed-and-shriveled hand. Now these Pharisees had already dogged Jesus' steps enough to know that whenever Jesus encountered disabled people like this, he always healed them. Look at verse 15: "**many followed him, and he healed them all.**" So since these Pharisees were already worked up about His contempt for their extrabiblical Sabbath traditions, they decided to make this guy with the withered hand a public test case. Verse 10: "**And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse him.**"

Jesus reveals the inhumanity of their rigid traditions by pointing out that every one of them would pull a farm animal out of a pit if it fell in on the Sabbath. Even *their* tradition—rigid as it was—permitted *that*. So why not to good

for hurting people, too, on the Sabbath? And when they had no answer for that, He healed the guy right there. Verse 13: **"He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other."** He fearlessly made a public display of both His compassion for the afflicted, and His contempt for the Pharisees' manmade tradition. I love how Jesus didn't mollycoddle the Pharisees or show them any false deference. He took every opportunity to deflate their religious arrogance with simple applications of the truth that exposed their error for everyone to see.

But notice the very next verse, because it is perhaps the key verse in Matthew 12: (verse 14) **"The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."**

They decided not merely to ignore Him; reject him; campaign against Him; or even simply discredit Him—but they were determined to **destroy him.**"

Notice: They have come to this point in the face of insurmountable evidence that proved He was the promised Messiah. They were expert students of the law, and they knew full well that Jesus perfectly fit the Old Testament description of the Deliverer who was to come and be both the Messiah of Israel and Redeemer of the world. More than that, Jesus had given them sufficient proof to establish His deity.

They hated Him anyway. In their assessment He had come at the wrong time, under the wrong circumstances, and now He was a threat to them rather than the kind of Deliverer

they wanted—someone who would *increase* their status. He declared His opposition to them at every opportunity, calling them (v. 34) "**You brood of vipers!**" evil men, (v. 39) "**an evil and adulterous generation,**" and telling them they were condemned. They didn't like Him at all, mainly because He rejected them as false teachers and thus undermined their status in the eyes of people whose admiration they sought. That was the one thing they were unwilling to relinquish, even to the Messiah, the anointed One sent by God.

And so (v. 14), "**the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.**" John 11 describes the discussion that took place in that council, or another one just like it. Put a marker here in Matthew 12 and turn to John 11 for just a moment. You need to see this, because it is a window into the hearts of these Pharisees, revealing more precisely what they were thinking. John 11:47:

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.

48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

See: they didn't dispute the reality of the miracles He performed. How could they? They had seen too many of His signs and wonders up close to write it all off as fakery or foolishness. He healed anyone and everyone, no matter how

severe the affliction. He cast out every demon, no matter how persistent. The Pharisees were *not* concerned because they thought He was the wrong person claiming to be Messiah. Precisely the opposite: He had the proper credentials, and if not opposed, they said, "**everyone will believe in him**"—and that would jeopardize the little spiritual power-base these Pharisees had built for themselves. They had a controlling influence in the Sanhedrin, and that body was more or less recognized by imperial decree under the Roman system as the authoritative governors of the religious life of Israel. It was a spiritual fiefdom which hung by a precarious thread anyway, because of the political uncertainties created by inevitable power struggles between Rome and the Herods and the Pharisees' laws and traditions. But as long as they could hold onto that little power base, they could feed their egos and fill their purses through the exercise of their earthly clout. Jesus was a significant threat to that status, and He reminded them of that every time He opposed them publicly like this.

In other words, they knew full well that He had a legitimate claim as the Messiah of Israel, and perhaps they were even beginning to understand that He was indeed God incarnate (because that was the claim He himself made in John 8). They had no cause for questioning His truthfulness; they had no rational argument to suggest that He was false in

any way; and they had every reason to submit to His Lordship. But they were determined to destroy Him anyway.

Mark 3:6 (describing this same event) even says "**The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.**" Now, the Herodians were bitter political and spiritual rivals to the Pharisees. They were Jews who had sold out their spiritual heritage as pure Israelites to become political supporters of Herod, the pagan ruler whose dynasty over Israel had been established as a matter of political expediency by the Roman emperor. The Herodians were a worldly political party, not a religious group like the Pharisees. In fact, all faithful Jews despised Herod's rule because his principles and his personal character opposed everything the Word of God stands for. (Remember that John the Baptist lost his head for pointing out Herod's sin.) I suppose a kind of parallel situation today would be if leading members of the evangelical intelligentsia made a pact with a group of Episcopalians in the gay-rights lobby to silence the preaching of the gospel in return for some kind of political clout. This was an overtly wicked thing to do, and in all likelihood, they did it as secretly as possible. *Back to Matthew 12.*

Jesus nevertheless knew about this council they had convened, because (v. 25) He "**[knew] their thoughts.**" So He withdrew (v. 15)—not because He feared them, but because He still had ministry to do. He was not finished doing these

amazing, miraculous works of healing and compassion that were designed to confirm His Messianic credentials. Look at the end of v. 15:

Many followed him, and he healed them all

16 and ordered them not to make him known.

17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

18 "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.

19 He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;

20 a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory;

21 and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Matthew's point, again, is that Jesus perfectly fit everything the Old Testament ever had to say about the Messiah. And everyone knew it. The Pharisees, who had studied the Old Testament more closely than anyone else, certainly knew that.

But here the conflict reaches the boiling point, and the Pharisees actually pass the point of no return in their opposition to Christ. Verse 22:

Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw.

23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

This same incident is recorded by Mark 3:22 and Luke 11:14-15. It was one of Jesus' most important healings, because the man who was healed was about as severely afflicted by the misery of sin as it is possible for one person to be without actually suffering in hell. He was demon-possessed; he was blind; and he was mute. So he suffered from *demonic* bondage as well as severe problems that required *physical healing*. This was an extremely sad case.

But Jesus healed him—instantly, miraculously, and publicly. No one could question this miracle. The demon was gone, and (v. 22) **"the man [both] spoke and saw."** Matthew says there were multitudes of witnesses, **"And all the people were amazed, and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'"** It was dawning on all Israel who this amazing Man might be. And that further exasperated the Pharisees. They became more determined than ever to destroy Him—even if it cost them their own souls.

That's when they answered with the ultimate blasphemy (v. 24): **"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."** They had used this ploy at least once

before, in Matthew 9:34, where **"the Pharisees said, 'He casts out demons by the prince of demons.'"** That time, Jesus seems to have ignored them, because the very next verse (Matthew 9:35) says, **"And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."** And that's when he told the disciples to pray for laborers for the harvest.

This time, however, (Matthew 12) he confronts the Pharisees head on. First, He points out the absurdity of their accusation. *How can Satan cast out Satan, and why would he?* Verse 26: **"if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?"** And in verse 27, He asks, **"If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges."**

That was another public jab that humiliated them. There were some exorcists among the Pharisees. Acts 19:13 speaks of **"itinerant Jewish exorcists,"** like the seven sons of Sceva who professed to be able to cast out demons (and probably had elaborate ceremonies, mostly based on sheer superstition, just as we see in the exorcists of the Roman Catholic church today). Mark 9:38-40 even describes some exorcists who were not among the immediate followers of Christ but who saw His power, believed in Him, and began

casting out demons in His name. Jesus told His disciples not to forbid them.

So exorcism was not an uncommon practice in that era. But no one ever dominated the demons the way Jesus did. That's why people marveled at His power. Matthew 9:33: **"When the demon had been cast out, the mute man spoke. And the crowds marveled, saying, 'Never was anything like this seen in Israel.'"**

The Pharisees' exorcists no doubt had a pretty dismal record of failure when it came to helping people in bondage to demons. So Jesus was needling the Pharisees when He said (Matthew 12:27), **"if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?"** *I'll put my record of success up against your record of failure, and let's permit your own exorcists to judge which of us has the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Verse 28: **"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."** If you're wrong, you're in serious trouble. How serious? Well (v. 29) no one can consistently cast out demons unless He is more powerful than them—powerful enough to bind Satan. And who can do that but God alone?

There's the strong hint of Jesus' deity in verse 29. He is *not* giving us instructions for demonic warfare or talking about binding Satan with magical incantations, the way a lot of people in the charismatic community today suppose. He

was pointing to His power over demons as proof that He was absolutely sovereign over them. Satan may be the strong one, but Jesus was stronger still. And that magnified the seriousness of the sin the Pharisees had just committed.

Now that's the end of my introduction. That brings us to our text for the day. Notice a few things here: *First*, it's clear that the sin Jesus was speaking about is the very sin these Pharisees had just committed. He is formally announcing that they had passed the point of no return with Him. Their rejection of Him was final, and their doom was sealed.

Second, He is warning others against pursuing that same path of deliberate rejection.

Third, the fact that three gospels record this warning for us indicates that it's important, and it is as applicable to you and me as it was to everyone in the crowd that day. Some people teach that the unpardonable sin is one that could only be committed in the physical presence of Jesus, and therefore no one today needs to be concerned about it. I'm not so sure about that. It's impossible to support that view from the text itself.

On the other hand, both the tone and the context make clear that Jesus was not warning us about a sin that's easy to commit accidentally or in ignorance. He was describing a sin that is uncommon and unlike any other.

And *fourth*: Some of the specific questions people the unpardonable sin are not answered for us here or anywhere

else in Scripture. Some things in the Bible are deliberately left in the realm of mystery. And regarding the unpardonable sin, Jesus gives no more explanation than we have right here (and in the cross references) about the nature of the unpardonable sin. It's not a lot, but it is enough to put us on guard and keep us watchful.

And what I want to do in the rest of our time this morning is outline what the passage *does* tell us about the unpardonable sin. I think you'll be surprised at how much *is* made clear for us. I also think it will both comfort you (especially if you are someone plagued with the fear that you might have unwittingly committed this sin); and give you a healthy, holy fear (especially if you are the type who thinks this warning is nothing you should be concerned about).

Here are three vital characteristics of the unpardonable sin that we can glean from the text:

1. IT IS EXTRAORDINARY, NOT COMMON

Now, pay careful attention to the text here. Despite the solemnity of the warning Jesus is about to issue, and with the gravity of this particular offense in full view, He nevertheless opens this statement with a vast promise of forgiveness: **"every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people."** That part is sweeping, comprehensive, and unqualified. **"Every sin and blasphemy"**—including all the sins that seem most scandalous to our human senses: murder, fornication, and even perversions such as homosexuality and all the evils that currently plague our society. All of those things are forgivable on the condition that the sinner repents and seeks forgiveness. God's pardon can always be obtained by the genuine confession of a repentant heart. **"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:9). Jesus *stresses* that truth. Notice: even blasphemy—a sin committed directly against the Person of God and the holiness of His Name—**"Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven."** That's the starting point, and it is a clear message of reassurance to the publican-and-sinner types who followed Jesus. God's mercies are inexhaustible. Lamentations 3:22-23: **"His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning."** Micah 7:18-19: **"Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression . . . ? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will**

cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." As we are reminded in 2 Corinthians 1:3, our God is **"the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."**

Think of the gross sins we *know* were forgiven in Scripture: David committed adultery and fomented a conspiracy to murder a man who was both a friend and faithful warrior under his command, and yet God forgave him. Saul of Tarsus persecuted the church and approved the murder of Christians, and yet he found not only forgiveness but honor and influence as one of the leading voices in the early church. In 1 Timothy 1:13, Paul said, **"Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy."** Peter denied the Lord with an oath after boasting that he would never do such a thing. Christ implicitly promised Peter forgiveness before he even committed the sin.

And wasn't the worst act of sin that was ever committed the murder of Jesus on the cross? But Jesus expressly prayed for His killers' forgiveness. It was one of his final sayings before He died (Luke 23:34): **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."**

All kinds of sin are forgivable, no matter how dark or ugly. That is Jesus' starting point in this statement, so what we have first of all is a vast promise of abundant pardon to anyone and everyone who will repent and lay hold of God's mercy. It's a powerful echo of Isaiah 55:1-7: **"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money,**

come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . . "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will *abundantly* pardon."

All the common sins of humanity—including the most abominable, repulsive, and even unmentionable evils that have ever been perpetrated—"All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men."

Except for one particular, unique, very specific sin. We know from the language Jesus used that He was describing an extraordinary sin, not an ordinary one. What was it? Verse 31: "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." Notice the definite article: "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"—not just any form of disobedience or sin or speaking against the Spirit of God, but a particular *kind* of blasphemy—an unusually egregious form of blasphemy. And the context makes clear that it was the exact sort of blasphemy the Pharisees had just committed—attributing Jesus' power to Satan when they knew He was working in the power of the Spirit. If there were really any doubt about this, Mark 3:29-30 settles it for us. Mark records that Jesus said this: "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." Then Mark adds this comment in verse 30: "[Because] they were saying,

'He has an unclean spirit.'" So that was the specific blasphemy He was warning against: By *knowingly* attributing Christ's power to Satan, in effect they were calling the Holy Spirit a devil. They looked at Jesus' messianic credentials and pronounced them the credentials of a demon-possessed person. It was the consummate blasphemy. When they blasphemed the Father by "**making void the word of God by [their] tradition,**" Jesus could rebuke and instruct them, as he did in Mark 7:13. When they blasphemed Jesus by saying in John 9:16, "**This man is not from God,**" the Holy Spirit could convict them of the truth about Him. But when with their eyes wide open, knowingly lied about the Holy Spirit, insisting that it was not He but Satan who empowered Jesus—especially while deliberately trying to dissuade other people from believing in Him—that was the kind of blasphemy for which there is no remedy or forgiveness, ever.

Now, I've already hinted strongly at the second characteristic of the unpardonable sin, and it's this:

2. IT IS DELIBERATE, NOT ACCIDENTAL

Remember what the Pharisees were doing and what Scripture tells us about their motives, and you'll see that their sin was calculated, intentional, and premeditated in the most evil and voluntary sense possible. They committed this sin with their eyes wide open.

Why was their attempt to dissuade people from following Christ unpardonable? Because when Saul of Tarsus, also a Pharisee, likewise tried to dissuade people from following Jesus, and even punctuated his evildoing with an act of murder in the martyrdom of Stephen, Saul still found forgiveness. The apostle Paul himself tells us why. First Timothy 1:12-13 again. Paul writes: **"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief."**

And remember Jesus' prayer from the cross: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** Now, obviously, on the level of sentient knowledge, the people who put Jesus to death *did* know they were killing an innocent man. According to Luke 23:47, one of the centurions at the cross even said, **"Certainly this man was innocent!"** But unlike these Pharisees in Matthew 12, they were not guilty of turning away from the settled, Spirit-wrought conviction that He was indeed their rightful Lord. So there was still something in their evil deed that was done out of ignorance and unbelief—as opposed to pure, undiluted, intentional, premeditated blasphemy against the Holy Spirit like these Pharisees had done.

As a matter of fact, if you check the cross-reference in Mark 3:21, you'll see that **"when his family heard [about Jesus'**

public ministry], they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" Then it's the very next verse that tells us, "The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul,' and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.'" So Jesus' own family accused Him of being crazy in the very same context where these Pharisees accused Him of being demon-possessed. Why was the sin of the Pharisees unpardonable, when Jesus' own family (including James and Jude, authors of the epistles that bear their names) were forgiven and even became leaders in the church?

First of all, it was the deliberate, willful knowledge of what they were doing that made the sin of the Pharisees in Matthew 12 unforgivable. Their eyes had been enlightened. They had witnessed, and investigated, and perhaps even been beneficiaries of Jesus' miracles, and yet they spurned Him with full knowledge of who He was.

This, I think, is where Jesus' warning about the unpardonable sin intersects with the warning passages in Hebrews. If you read Hebrews carefully, you will see that it is dotted with warning passages throughout. These usually come as interruptions in the flow of the text, and each time there's a warning, it is stronger and more shrill. They are warnings against falling away from Christ, and some Christians find them theologically troubling. I don't.

Are these warnings that a true believer might lose his salvation? Of course not. Scripture is full of promises that God Himself will keep us from falling. He guarantees that we will persevere to the end. He saves us to the uttermost. So I hope you know the Hebrews warning passages are not suggesting that someone might have salvation for a time and then lose it.

But Hebrews was written to Jewish people who had shown an interest in following Christ but had fallen short of embracing Him with a whole heart. They were being tempted by their own religious tradition and tantalized by the error of the Judaizers. In their confusion, some of them were retreating from Christ and going back to Old Testament Judaism. So the epistle was written to encourage such people to go on with Christ and enter into his rest—the Sabbath rest of genuine saving faith. In other words, the warnings were written to people who were not true Christians at all, but people who had been enlightened so that they had seen the truth. They associated with the church and followed the gospel with interest and understanding, but not with real faith. They knew the truth. They had been awakened by the Holy Spirit, and in that sense were partakers with Him, too. Their eyes, like the Pharisees in Matthew 12, were wide open. But they were halting and faltering about publicly identifying with Christ, because that involved a step away from their religious comfort zone. It might mean persecution

and isolation. So they held back, and some even turned away. (Just like some people who are nominal Christians today do.) And those warnings caution them of the dangers of turning away after seeing the truth. Listen, for example, to Hebrews 6:4-6: **"It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt."** The stress is on the *deliberate* nature of this sin. Listen to Hebrews 10:26-27: **"If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries."**

That, I believe, is the very same unpardonable sin Jesus was talking about. It is willful. It is a deliberate, calculated, and final turning away by someone with full knowledge of what he or she is doing. It is a calculated, intentional act of blasphemy, not merely a sin of ignorant unbelief.

And its deliberate nature is one of the main factors that makes it unpardonable. Such a sin closes and hardens the heart with absolute, irreversible finality. Having knowingly spurned the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry (which is the

only thing that might ever have converted them) these people are left without any possibility of salvation.

But there's more. Here's a third, and final, characteristic of the unpardonable sin from Matthew 12:

3. IT IS A SIN OF THE HEART, NOT MERELY OF THE LIPS

It is frightening to watch those YouTube videos from people who answered the Blasphemy Challenge when you realize that what you are seeing is a premeditated attempt to commit the very blasphemy Jesus rebuked these Pharisees for and the writer of Hebrews cautioned his readers against. Many of those people on the videos could indeed be deliberately damning their own souls without any possible remedy or restoration. **"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"** (Hebrews 10:31). It is an even more frightening thing to subject yourself to His judgment out of arrogant, willful, deliberate unbelief.

Still, I don't think a person necessarily commits the unpardonable sin merely by *professing* to deny the Holy Spirit and mouthing those words. My hope is that some of those people on those videos, like the apostle Paul, are guilty only of *ignorant* unbelief, and that there is still hope for them.

And the determining factor one way or the other is the state of their hearts, which only God can see clearly. Look at verses 33-37:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.

36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,

37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Jesus' point is that our words are important because they express what's in our hearts. In fact, the real problem—the source of our wickedness—is not merely in the words we say, but in the wicked heart that is the incubator of the words.

Words are vital—**"by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"**—but the reason words are vital is because they are the undeniable evidence of what's really in the heart. And the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is first of all a heart-sin before it ever gives birth to spoken blasphemy. And that is another good reason to guard our hearts.

Now, I think the reason Jesus puts so much stress on the *expression* of blasphemy and the *speaking of words* here is that in addition to the willful, premeditated evil behind this

act, the one factor that makes it the most heinous, indefensible, divinely-intolerable evil of all is that it involves a purposeful attempt to undermine the faith of others. If these Pharisees had kept their unbelief to themselves, who knows? there might have been some potential in the infinite grace of God for them to be converted and find true forgiveness. But they deliberately attacked and tried to destroy the faith of people who were still under the Holy Spirit's conviction and had not yet come to full faith. They gave voice to the evil that was in their hearts, and God withdrew His grace forever from these men. Jesus in effect pronounced them irredeemable.

Now, there's a lot more left to say about the unpardonable sin, and we will get there in the next few weeks, but let me wrap up this morning by giving some words of encouragement to those who struggle with fears that they might be guilty of an unpardonable sin:

Remember, this sin is a very specific and extraordinary one. It's not the sin of careless, thoughtless blasphemy. It's not any sin like fornication, murder, or even suicide. It is a deliberate, purposeful blasphemy that closes the heart, sears the conscience, and intentionally, knowingly turns away from the Holy Spirit henceforth and forever. That means if you're truly concerned enough that you might have committed it so that you pray to God for forgiveness, you

haven't committed it at all. You can still turn to God for forgiveness and find Him eager to forgive and abundantly pardon.

And let me make this invitation: If you're someone who struggles with this fear and you cannot find peace in that struggle, come see me, or Don, or any of the GraceLife leadership—especially our Bible study leaders. It would be our privilege to pray with you and help you seek forgiveness and salvation, and to plumb with you the depths of this vast promise that Jesus gave: "**Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people.**" And we will give thanks with you "**unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth forever.**"