

THERE'S AN UNFORGIVABLE SIN?

MATTHEW 12:22-32

An article on the website *The Science of Us* listed what they called "17 Things We Know About Forgiveness." It offered a scientific study on who—or what—does not forgive. The article summarized the research this way. Cats never forgive. Some of you out there may already be aware of that fact! Scientists have observed conciliatory behavior in many different animal species. For example, primates like bonobos, mountain gorillas, and chimps often follow confrontations with friendly behavior like embracing or kissing. Scientists have observed similar behaviors in goats and hyenas. The only species that has so far failed to show any outward signs of reconciliation whatsoever are domestic cats. I guess every sin for a cat is unforgivable.

We've been looking at several hard sayings of Jesus now for several weeks. On occasion, Jesus said and did things that appear to contradict or challenge our assumptions about God, salvation, and what it means to be a Christian. Today, I want you to look with me at something Jesus said that challenges the extent or range of God's forgiveness. We cherish the belief that God's forgiveness is infinite and available to one and all. The Bible says, "He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west." (Ps. 103:12 NLT) Vast, infinite, limitless forgiveness. The Bible also says, "He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins." (Eph. 1:7 NLT) Forgiveness available to one and all. But is it? Is God's forgiveness truly limitless and available to everyone under any and all conditions? Well, let's consider something Jesus said. What makes this a hard saying? Well, Jesus used a phrase – "blaspheme the Holy Spirit" – that sounds a bit strange and bizarre to our ears. What is that? And then He went on to say that if someone blasphemes the Holy Spirit, God cannot and will not forgive that sin. Ever. No pardon will be offered. It's an unforgivable sin. So, Jesus Himself throws a wrench into our assumption that God can and will forgive any sin under any and all conditions. Apparently not. Consider with me, first of all...

WHAT BLASPHEMING THE HOLY SPIRIT MEANT.

Jesus performed some spectacular miracles. In the story we read, He expelled a demon from a man who'd been rendered both blind and mute by this possession. Ordinary Jews began to wonder openly if Jesus was the son of King David which was a popular way, at that time, to refer to someone who might be the Messiah. Apparently, a group of Pharisees – part of the religious establishment – vehemently disagreed. They said, "Oh, no. Jesus is able to cast out demons because He is colluding with Satan himself." Now, they used the name Beelzebub or Beelzebul – depending on your translation – which was the name some of the non-Jews from that region had given to one of their false gods. But clearly Jesus knew they were accusing Him of being in cahoots with the devil himself. He said, "If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out?" (Mt. 12:26-27 NIV) In Jesus' mind, Satan and Beelzebul were one and the same. In Mark's version of the story, these Pharisees also said Jesus was himself demon possessed. "But the teachers of

religious law who had arrived from Jerusalem said, ‘He’s possessed by Satan, the prince of demons.... He’s possessed by an evil spirit.’” (Mk. 3:22, 30 NLT)

Jesus made it clear this level of spiritual blindness was blasphemy of the worst sort. In general, blasphemy is all about being defiantly irreverent about anything to do with God. It might be cursing God and degrading things relating to God. Blasphemy can also involve believing or saying God is responsible for something evil or not giving Him the credit or recognition for something good and holy. That’s precisely what this group of Pharisees did. They witnessed irrefutable proof that Jesus was working miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit. If anyone should have recognized Jesus for who He was, it was the Pharisees. But instead they chose defiance. Instead of recognizing the power and authority of God in Jesus’ actions, they accused Him of being possessed by a demon and colluding with the devil even though they knew the truth and had the proof. Jesus said their absolute contempt for and willful rejection of what they had seen and heard was actually an attack on the Holy Spirit. It was a rejection of God’s grace. Furthermore, to attack or blaspheme the Holy Spirit was a sin that could not be forgiven. Jesus said, “... ‘but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences.’” (Mk. 3:29 NLT) No forgiveness ever. Never.

Why did Jesus say, “Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come.” (Mt. 12:32 NLT) The title “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite way of referring to Himself. Why was speaking against Him a sin that could be forgiven, but speaking against the Holy Spirit was not? The phrase “son of man” could also be an idiomatic way of talking about human beings in Jesus’ day and time. As a result, Jesus might have been saying, “Anyone who speaks against the son of man (a man or a person) can be forgiven....” In other words, speaking against human beings was forgivable, but not speaking against God Himself. Jesus could have meant it that way. Or here’s another option. Jesus might have recognized who He was – the Incarnate Son of God – was somewhat hidden and veiled from everyone at that point in time. It was possible people could be legitimately confused about or ignorant as to Jesus’ identity. But these Pharisees had seen the power of God released and unleashed. Instead of acknowledging it, they deliberately rejected it and said it was a demonic activity rather than a Spirit-directed action.

So, how did Jesus’ respond to the Pharisees’ hateful accusations? He said Satan does not fight against Satan. “Any kingdom divided by civil war is doomed. A town or family splintered by feuding will fall apart. And if Satan is casting out Satan, he is divided and fighting against himself. His own kingdom will not survive.” (Mt. 12:25-26 NLT) To use a phrase much in the news today, there was no collusion! Not between Jesus and the devil. Any organized group such as a city, a kingdom, or even a family will destroy itself if it attacks itself. If Jesus was using Satan’s power to expel Satan’s demons from people, then Satan was at war with himself and his kingdom was doomed. Jesus was saying that while Satan was indeed evil personified, he wasn’t stupid. Then, Jesus also claimed that His ability to cast out demonic spirits was a sign to everyone that the Kingdom of God was now present and powerfully active in His life and ministry. “But if I

am casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you. For who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger—someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house.” (Mt. 12:28-29 NLT)

The devil was the “strong man.” He has his own kingdom or house. He has an organized group over whom he rules and reigns. He was and still is at war with the Kingdom of God. This world was and still is the arena where those two kingdoms war against each other. Satan has proved the strength and power of his kingdom by the obvious demonstrations of sin, demon possession, disease, and death among human beings. But now Someone had finally arrived on the scene who was vastly greater in power than this strong man: Jesus, the Son of God and the Lord of the Universe. The Kingdom of God had begun its work. One demonstration of it was releasing people from the misery and torment of demon possession. The fact is Jesus has confronted Satan on every field of spiritual battle and in every possible spiritual arena and utterly crushed him. He cast out demons. He healed diseases. He destroyed the power of sin at the cross. And the empty tomb is God’s answer to the enemy of death. Jesus proclaimed something that day we need to rejoice in and celebrate every day: the absolute victory of Jesus and the absolute defeat of Satan.

I love a story a missionary couple told about a snake. They were serving the Lord in some steamy jungle part of the world. One day, an enormous snake—much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for someone who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue. He calmly marched into their house and decapitated the snake with one clean chop. The neighbor re-emerged triumphant. He assured the missionaries the snake had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned: It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead. A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about in their home, smashing furniture, flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head. Sweating in the heat, those missionaries felt frustrated, a little sick, but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. And at some point in their waiting the proverbial lightbulb turned on for them. They realized that snake was like the devil. And their home was like this world. Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head at the cross and the empty tomb. He's finished. He's done for. He just doesn't know it yet. And so he continues to thrash around causing despair, pain, and misery in as many people's lives as possible. The temptation for us is to despair. But like that missionary couple, we have to remember, it won't last forever. The devil is defeated. Jesus has already won. So, we've looked at what the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit meant back in Jesus' day and time. Is there any relevance or application to you and me? I believe so.

WHAT BLASPHEMING THE HOLY SPIRIT MEANS.

Some Bible teachers say this particular type of blasphemy can't be duplicated today. On the one hand, I see their point. Those Pharisees literally had the Son of God Himself standing right in front of them. They saw with their own eyes the miracles He did. Jesus isn't physically on Earth today. He's spiritually present, yes, but not physically. No one today can personally witness Jesus performing a miracle and then attribute that power to Satan instead of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, I hope those teachers aren't saying it's impossible to blaspheme the Holy Spirit today. I believe it is. I hope they're not saying there's no such thing as an unforgivable sin. I believe there is.

There's still one sin God cannot and will not forgive. Unrepentant unbelief. What were the Pharisees guilty of? Knowing what was true and refusing to acknowledge it. Knowing God was present and real, but rejecting His representative in the person of Jesus. Can that attitude still be demonstrated today? Of course it can. The sin that's still impossible to forgive today is the state of lifelong, hardened, stubborn, unrepentant unbelief in Jesus, the salvation He has provided, and His rightful claim to be the Lord of your life and mine. Jesus described the work of the Holy Spirit in this way, "And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment." (Jo. 16:8 NLT) So, one of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of our sins and point us toward Jesus for salvation. When you resist the Holy Spirit's conviction and it becomes a lifelong, unrepentant rejection of Jesus, you've committed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

There's no forgiveness in this life or in any kind of life to come for any person who is determined to reject the Holy Spirit's promptings and urging to trust in Jesus and become His follower. If you die in that state of unrepentant unbelief, Scripture is clear about what happens next. Lifelong unbelief and rejection of Jesus means you have never repented. Therefore, you can't receive God's forgiveness even in eternity. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them." (Jo 3:36 NLT) If you've repudiated and rejected the only way God provides salvation, it's impossible to find salvation anywhere else. God's forgiveness is conditional on confession and repentance, isn't it? The Bible says, "But if we confess our sins to him, (a condition) he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." (1 Jo. 1:9 NLT) God doesn't just forgive sin without our involvement. If you can't confess, you can't repent. If you can't repent, then you can't be forgiven. It's not that God has shut you out of Heaven and an eternal relationship with Him; you've shut yourself out.

Let me hasten to add something important. People who are committing this sin could care less they're committing it. They only have total disdain and disregard for God or anything to do with God. If they were here today to see us receive Communion, they'd scoff at us and despise what we did as absolute foolishness. The idea of sin and a God who holds us accountable is a ridiculous idea to them. So much nonsense. Like the Pharisees, they reject what is holy, good, and true dismissing it as something foolish, bad, or false. I've never run into a person who thinks he or she has committed the unforgivable sin, but I understand there are such people. They're often consumed with guilt and believe they've somehow forfeited any chance of knowing salvation through

Jesus. This is very sad, because the fact they're concerned about having committed this sin is proof they haven't committed it. If you're afraid or concerned you've committed the unforgivable sin, I can guarantee you have not. People who commit the unforgivable sin have lost any sense of sin or being convicted whatsoever.

Only God can ever know if someone's committed the unforgivable sin. You and I can never make that judgment. Peter denied he even knew Jesus three times. Was that a sin? Of course it was. Was it unforgivable? No. Peter was weak and inconsistent. He failed badly, but his heart was loyal to Jesus. He repented fully and Jesus forgave Him fully. Judas might well be an example of someone who committed the unforgivable sin. He's sometimes depicted as misunderstood, but Scripture makes it clear Judas deliberately and knowingly turned himself over to Satan. Yes, he felt some kind of remorse over his betrayal, but apparently he never truly repented. Instead, he preferred suicide. Defiance – a fist in God's face - right to the very end. Then, there was Paul. He put Christians in jail and helped to kill them. Surely, his sins were unforgivable!

Sometimes the people who are farthest from God today become the greatest examples of His mercy and grace tomorrow. That was Paul if it was anyone. Here's how Paul himself put it, "I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus." (1 Tim. 1:13-14 NLT) You might have a family member, a friend, or a neighbor who is about as far from God today as you can imagine. It just seems like his or her entire life is just one great fist shaking itself defiantly in God's face. Don't give up. Keep praying. Put up with even their ridicule of your faith in Jesus. Look for opportunities to bless them and point them to Jesus. You never know how much God will use your faithful prayers and your witness to enable them one day to repent and throw themselves on God's mercy and grace.

Would agree that someone who's into the occult and is a self-proclaimed witch is far from God? It wouldn't be hard to conclude such a person was committing the unforgivable sin – open, defiant, unrepentant unbelief. Kimberly Shumate was a witch. But for some reason, she felt drawn to Jesus and to visit a local church. When she sat down, she silently shot up a desperate prayer: "God, please give me someone in this crazy crowd I can relate to. If you don't give me someone, I'm walking out of here." At that moment, the pastor told the congregation to stand up and shake a few hands. Kimberly introduced herself to Lisa, whose dyed-red hair and nose ring suggested they might be at a similar place. After all Kimberly was sporting black-and-white hair and a spiked belt. Lisa, a fellow spiritual seeker, and Kimberly became fast friends.

Looking back now, Kimberly wondered how those church members tolerated having her in their midst for so long. She was angry and exasperated as she sat there listening to their "good news." How could there be only one way to God? At the end of each message, she marched down the aisle to the pastor and began firing off an onslaught of questions. After three or four weeks of verbal sparring, he humbly offered the associate pastor's ear to Kimberly. She made her rounds from one church leader to another,

finally ending up at a Friday night Bible study looking for answers. As she sat on the floor in the leader's living room, she did feel a peace in the midst this group of people who seemed to care about each other. After the study, Lisa sat beside her as Scott, the Bible study leader, patiently listened to Kimberly's New Age arguments. But Scott's words—and especially the Bible's words—confounded her cosmic view. After they'd sat there for an hour debating, Kimberly was exhausted. Her hardened heart and argumentative nature finally had had enough.

As Lisa drove her home, Kimberly's mind ached. She thought, "How could a book – the Bible - written by so many different people over the course of hundreds of years fit together perfectly as if one amazing storyteller had written the whole thing?" Right there in the car, the Holy Spirit began melting her vanity and arrogance with a power stronger than any hex, incantation, or spell she'd ever used. Suddenly, the blindfold she'd worn for almost 30 years was stripped away, and in that moment she knew what she'd been searching for: Jesus! The same God she'd neglected, whose name she'd used as profanity, whom she'd flat-out rejected, was the One who'd sent His Son to suffer for her and to take her guilty verdict so she could be found innocent. Her eyes filled with tears as she exchanged the spiritual darkness she'd lived in for the light of God's truth.

Kimberly soon realized it was time to clean house. Her first act of obedience was to throw out all her books on witchcraft and the paranormal, as well as her Tarot cards. But the most important possession—and the most difficult to discard—was her treasured crystal ball. She called Lisa. She came right over, and they immediately drove to the Pacific Ocean. Kimberly's heart pounded as if demons themselves were after them. They stood at the end of Malibu Pier, their beaming faces reflecting the radiance of the setting sun. Kimberly unwrapped the crystal's black velvet cover. Light streamed out like rainbows as the sun's rays met the thick crystal. As she dropped the ball into the water, Kimberly knew her future was secure. Now she had a Savior who would be with her always. He had waited for her through all those years of anger, fear, disappointment, and bad choices. All the mistakes she'd ever made were wiped clean in that moment of complete and utter forgiveness.

Is there an unforgivable sin? Yes. Unrepentant unbelief. If you're bound and determined to defy God and go into eternity without Him, He will let you do that. But the offer of eternal salvation is there and available even to the most hostile, lost, far from God person imaginable. God loves lost people. You should know. You were one. I was one. But, by God's grace, we've been forgiven and we're destined to spend eternity with the One who gave His life for us.