What is the Unforgivable Sin?

Michael d'Offay 30 June 2016



Because we cherish the work and person of the Holy Spirit, the question about the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit often comes up. The Scripture which deals with this in Mark 3:29-30 has often caused Christians great fear. 'How do I know if I have committed the unforgivable sin?'

I know some who have slumped into hopeless despair, believing that they would never be able to find forgiveness, since they had cursed God, hated His name, mocked the Holy Spirit, or done unspeakably evil things which they now deeply regret.

Straight up, let me be clear that blasphemy can be forgiven. The apostle Paul's life offers evidence that blasphemy as such is forgivable. He says, '...though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief' (1 Timothy 1:13). Paul had spoken evil of Jesus and tried to actively destroy the church, yet he found undeserved mercy.

Blasphemy Against the Spirit

So is the Bible then contradicting itself? Not at all. Let's look at the context of Mark 3 in order to understand what Jesus is saying.

To put the Scripture in perspective, we see that Jesus was ministering in great power by the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were jealous of Jesus and could not believe that this carpenter from Galilee (of all places!) was the promised Messiah. They accused Him of having an evil spirit when it was plain to see that God was with Him.

It was in this context that Jesus says to them, ‘”Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit”’ (Mark 3:29-30).

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So blaspheming the Spirit speaks of a willful rejection of Jesus and the Spirit's activity on Him. In other words, it is a rejection of Jesus, the anointed one.

People who reject Jesus ‘never have forgiveness’ because they reject the very means of forgiveness. To use an illustration: it is like a filthy person who hasn't washed for a year telling you that water is very dangerous and bad for your health. Because he has called something which could help him evil, he rejects the very means of getting clean!

Therefore blasphemy against the Spirit is not unforgivable in the sense that God is powerless or unwilling to forgive, but in the sense that the sinner is unwilling to receive forgiveness. As Thomas Oden says, ‘The sin is not unpardonable because the atoning work of the Son is not sufficient for that sin, but because that sufficient work is willfully demeaned, blocked, and detested by those for whom it would otherwise be entirely sufficient.*’

> The only unforgivable sin is an ongoing rejection of Jesus, who was anointed and endorsed by the precious Holy Spirit.

A Warning for Us

As a note of warning: many well-meaning Christians criticise or resist the unusual manifestations of the Holy Spirit and call it demonic. I don't believe it is an unforgivable sin, because they are not

willfully rejecting Jesus as Lord, but in practice they are rejecting the work of Jesus and quenching the Holy Spirit. Yes, it is true that the devil counterfeits the miraculous and we are called to test all things. But in doing so, let us make sure we don't become critical of when the Spirit moves in ways we don't understand.

Paul, the ex-blasphemer, continues in 1 Timothy 1:14: 'the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.'
God's grace overflows towards people. It never runs out or dries up. It is always more than enough to wash away any sin and cleanse any hardened heart. For those who are fearful of having committed the unforgivable sin, the fact you are fearful is a healthy sign. It means that the Spirit is working within you to cause you to turn to Jesus.

The only unforgivable sin is an ongoing rejection of Jesus, who was anointed and endorsed by the precious Holy Spirit. If we reject Him, we reject all means of forgiveness.

Allow the Spirit to have His way with you, and let's continue to keep Jesus at the centre.

*Thomas Oden. Classic Christianity: Systematic Theology. Harper Collins Ebooks