

The Unpardonable Sin

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

The unpardonable sin is the extreme sin Jesus warns against in [Matthew 12:31-32](#), [Mark 3:28-29](#), and [Luke 12:10](#). Christians hold at least four different views on what the unpardonable sin is.

SUMMARY

This essay will survey four views on the unpardonable sin: (1) Commit a really bad sin such as adultery, murder, or denying Christ under pressure. (2) Assert what is false about the Spirit. (3) Attribute Spirit-empowered miracles to Satan. (4) Decisively reject clear truth the Spirit revealed about Jesus by attributing his mighty works to Satan. This article argues for the fourth view.

Introduction

The unpardonable sin is the extreme sin Jesus warns against in [Matthew 12](#), [Mark 3](#), and [Luke 12](#):

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but *the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven*. 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 ([Matt 12:31-32](#)).

Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but *whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin* ([Mark 3:28-29](#)).

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but *the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven* ([Luke 12:10](#)).

People refer to this extreme sin as the unpardonable sin, the unforgivable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and the eternal sin. Some people agonize whether they are guilty of committing it. Can a person commit the unpardonable sin today? If so, who and how? Why is the sin unforgivable? The answers depend on what exactly the sin is. What follows explains four views on what the unpardonable sin is and argues for the fourth view.

View 1. Commit a Really Bad Sin Such as Adultery, Murder, or Denying Christ under Pressure

According to this popular view, most sins are forgivable, but sins such as adultery, murder, and denying Christ when threatened with persecution are so bad that they are unforgivable. This view is wrong not merely because it doesn't fit the literary context of [Matthew 12](#), [Mark 3](#), and [Luke 12](#). It is wrong because the Bible includes examples of people who committed those very sins and received God's forgiveness: (1) King David committed adultery and murdered Uriah ([2Sam 11–12](#); [Ps 51](#)); (2) Paul testifies, “formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent [NIV: *a violent man*]” ([1Tim 1:13](#); cf. [1Cor 15:9](#)); and (3) the Apostle Peter denied Christ three times ([John 18:15–18](#), [25–27](#); [21:15–19](#)). Genuine Christians still sin in all kinds of ways—including grieving the Holy Spirit of God ([Eph 4:30](#)). Anyone who claims otherwise is a liar: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” ([1Jn 1:10](#)). But God forgives repenting sinners because of Jesus: “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” ([1Jn 2:1a](#)).

View 2. Assert What Is False about the Spirit

Most of the early church fathers who address the unpardonable sin take this view. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem asserts, “A man must often fear to say, either from ignorance or assumed reverence, what is improper about the Holy Spirit, and thereby come under this condemnation” (*Catecheses* 16.1).

This view is unlikely because it describes the sin too generally. Many non-Christians have expressed false beliefs about the Spirit but later have become Christians and believed correctly about the Spirit. And many Christians have expressed false beliefs about the Spirit but later corrected those beliefs as they matured in understanding what the Bible reveals about the Spirit. For example, a Christian may realize that it is wrong to refer to the Holy Spirit as “it” since he is a person.

View 3. Attribute Spirit-Empowered Miracles to Satan

MIRACLES TO SATAN

This view is common among dispensationalists. Some who hold this view specify that one could commit this sin only during Jesus' earthly ministry because the Spirit-empowered miracles refer exclusively to the miracles that Jesus performed. Others argue that one could commit this sin during the period of supernatural sign miracles in the first century but not after that since sign miracles ceased. Limiting the miracles to Jesus' miracles, they argue, is too narrow since the context of [Luke 12:10](#) includes miracles by Jesus' twelve disciples.

This view is not compelling because, as D. A. Carson argues, "Apart from the question of whether miracles take place now, Jesus elsewhere warned that miracles are not necessarily the criterion of true discipleship ([Matt] 7:21–23); i.e., they do not necessarily reveal the Spirit's presence and power."¹

View 4. Decisively Reject Clear Truth the Spirit Revealed about Jesus by Attributing His Mighty Works to Satan

Those who commit the unpardonable sin, explains John Calvin, "with evil intention, resist God's truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance."² They decisively reject clear Spirit-revealed truth about Jesus by attributing his mighty works to Satan. They *decisively* reject Jesus because they never repent. They continue to rebel against Jesus until they die. Instead of submitting to who Jesus is and recognizing that the Spirit empowered Jesus' mighty works, they rebel against Jesus by declaring that Satan empowered his mighty works.

The unpardonable sin is not an accidental, impulsive, or unguarded slip of the tongue. It is deliberately repudiating the truth about Jesus. God responds to such rebellion by hardening the rebel's heart and not giving that person a desire to repent and believe. The sin is unforgivable because God never enables that person to repent and believe. So this is a sin that only unbelievers can commit.

Only God knows who is guilty of this sin. It is impossible for a mere human to know with certainty that a fellow human has committed the unpardonable sin and is thus beyond repentance. Many people who appear to have committed this sin later repent and believe.

This sin can overlap with apostasy. (Apostasy is decisively turning away from the faith. An apostate is a person who once claimed to be a Christian but has irreversibly abandoned and renounced orthodox Christianity.) Since some people who commit the unpardonable sin have never claimed to be Christ-followers, they are not technically apostates. The Pharisees whom Jesus addressed, for example, were not apostates. They were on the brink of committing the unpardonable sin, but they did not claim to be Christ-followers and then irreversibly abandon and renounce Christ and his teachings.

But those who commit the unpardonable sin are similar to apostates in that they have resolutely rejected the truth and are beyond repentance. The fate of those who commit the unpardonable sin parallels the fate of apostates in at least three passages on apostasy: “it is impossible ... to restore them again to repentance” ([Heb 6:4–6](#)); “one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God ... and has outraged the Spirit of grace” ([Heb 10:29](#)); “there is sin that leads to death” ([1Jn 5:16](#)). In each of those three passages, notes Carson, “There is self-conscious perception of where the truth lies and the light shines—and a willful turning away from it”—just as with the unpardonable sin in the Synoptic Gospels.³ (See the articles “What Is Apostasy? Can a Christian Become Apostate?” and “The Sin unto Death.”)

Those who have committed the unpardonable sin are not worried about it. They are hardened in their unbelief. So if you are worried that you have committed the unpardonable sin, that is a reliable sign that you have not committed it. If you are ashamed of your sin against God, then you have not committed the unpardonable sin. So instead of feeling hopelessly condemned, keep turning from your sins, and keep trusting Jesus. If you are in Jesus the Messiah, then there is “no condemnation” for you ([Rom 8:1](#)).

FOOTNOTES

¹ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Mark*, 2nd ed., Expositor’s Bible Commentary 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 336.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:6:17.

³ Carson, “Matthew,” 337.

FURTHER READING

- Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, pp. 1140–43.
- D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew–Mark*, 2nd ed., pp. 336–37.
- William W. Combs, “[The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit](#).” Combs’s article condenses and updates his doctoral thesis: “The Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1985).
- Myk Habets, “Jesus, the Spirit, and the Unforgivable Sin: A Contribution from Spirit Christology,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12 (2018): 39–57.
- Jonathan T. Pennington, “[You Asked: What Is the Unforgivable Sin?](#)”
- John Piper, “[Beyond Forgiveness: Blasphemy against the Spirit](#).”
- Thomas R. Schreiner, “[What Is the Unforgivable Sin?](#)”
- Sam Storms, “What Is Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?” ch. 6 in *Tough Topics: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions*.

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