



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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## What is the Unpardonable Sin?

Matthew 12:31–32

**W**HEREFORE I SAY UNTO YOU, ALL MANNER OF sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

“Few passages of Scripture,” writes one expositor, “have been more misinterpreted and misunderstood than these two verses.” That is an understatement. This article, therefore, is my humble attempt to examine the text, consider some biblical examples of this sin, and finally exhort us all in the practical application.

### Examination of the Text

*First*, we should get a handle on the meaning of **blasphemy**. This is a direct transliteration of the Greek noun that appears here, *blasphēmia*. In secular Greek it (and the verb form *blasphemeō*) refer not only to “abusive speech” but also to “the strongest form of personal mockery and calumny.” They’re almost equal, in fact, to *loidoria*, railing in harsh, insolent, and abusive speech<sup>1</sup> (note “re-viled” for *blasphemeō* in Matt. 27:39).

What is most significant about these words is that while our English word means speaking evil of *God*, the Greek means speaking evil of *anyone*. We find, in fact, no less than six usages in the New Testament for the objects of blasphemy: God (1 Tim. 1:13; 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:5–6); Christ (Matt. 27:39; Mk. 15:29; Lk. 23:39); Holy Spirit (our text; cf. Mk. 3:28–29); the Word of God (1 Tim. 6:1;

and Titus 2:5); angels (1<sup>st</sup>-century Gnostics despised the idea of angels, and Jude 8 and 2 Peter 2:10–11 seem to refer to such teachers who “speak evil of dignities”); and even people (Paul was treated “slandorously,” 1 Cor. 4:13, and “defamed,” 10:30, “evil spoken of”). So, regardless of the object, blasphemy is extremely serious sin.

*Second*, as our text indicates, while horrendously evil, all such **blasphemy** (except one) is forgivable. The text goes even further to say that not only **blasphemy** but also **all manner of sin** is forgivable. In this case, the Greek *pas* (**all manner**) means “all inclusively,” which certainly includes a wide range of sin: lying, stealing, vulgarity, drunkenness, adultery, murder, even suicide (contrary to the teaching of Roman Catholicism), and the list goes on.

*Third*, what then is **blasphemy against the Holy Ghost**, the one sin that is not forgivable? One popular view is that this sin cannot even be committed today because, it is alleged, it could only be committed while Jesus was on the earth performing miracles in the Spirit’s power and so only in this very limited context by the Pharisees. This seems odd, however. Why even mention this if it is the only time in history that it would ever be true? What’s the point of bringing it up if it has no bearing on anyone else in the present or future?

We would also point out that Jesus’ promise that He would send “another Comforter” (Jn. 14:6) should be considered. “Another” is not *heteros*, which means “another of a different kind” (Eng. *heterodox* and *heterosexual*), rather it is *allos*, “another of similar or identical nature.” How thrilling! The Savior is saying in essence, “When I depart, I will send another in my place Who is virtually identical to

Me.” No, He is not physically here doing miracles, but He is still here, still working mightily *for* us, *in* us, and *through* us. We would also add, since this incident is also recorded in Mark, it does not seem wise to insist that it’s strictly Jewish, as some insist about the book of Matthew. We submit, therefore, that there is no good reason to relegate this incident to another age and thereby dismiss it as irrelevant today. In fact, as we will see, it has a very important significance in *every* age. Let us now note the *what* and the *why*.

What, then, is this sin? Jesus tells us that it is *the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost* (*tou pneumatos blasphēmia*). As always, the definite article is significant. It demonstrates here that a specific type of blasphemy is in view, namely, **against the Holy Ghost**, that is, attributing the great and mighty works of the Holy Spirit to Satan. We would submit further, as we’ll see later, that this can still be done today.

The question now arises, however, *why* is this sin unpardonable? As is usually the case, if a *text* is not completely clear, the *context* is. As we look at the Pharisees (who we insist are representative of all men), we see not one hint of the acknowledgment of sin, which is an absolute prerequisite for forgiveness. In every case of forgiveness recorded in Scripture, such admission was present—for example, David (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 51); the woman in the city of Nain in Capernaum (Lk. 7:36–50); the prodigal son (Lk. 15:13, 21–24; ); Peter (Matt. 26:74–75; Lk. 22:31–32; Jn. 18:15–18, 25–27; 21:15–17); and Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1; 22:4; 26:9–11; 1Cor. 15:9; Eph. 3:8; Phil. 3:6). Not so the Pharisees. There was in them not only unbelief, but indifferent, intentional, and insolent unbelief. There was a coldness and callousness that with malice of forethought refused to acknowledge their sin, even to the point of ascribing to Satan the things of God that they had seen and clearly understood.

Paul actually provides us with an illustration in himself. As he wrote to Timothy:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer [*blasphemos*], and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. (1 Tim. 1:12–13)

Paul was actually a hairsbreadth from the unpardonable sin. He was indeed a blasphemer, but he did it all in *ignorant* unbelief, while the Pharisees in dramatic contrast did so in *knowing*, even *deliberate*, unbelief. In fact, just a few verses before our text we read: “And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David?” (v. 23). Everyone who witnessed what Jesus did recognized that He did it in God’s power and in fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. The only way one could reject Him was to do so willfully and deliberately and thereby ascribe what He did

as *Satanic* power not *Spirit* power—and *that* was unforgivable.

There is one more aspect of this scene that makes the issue even clearer. A further reason that this sin is unpardonable is because it literally and quite completely *prevents* pardon and repentance. Despite irrefutable evidence, despite the clear proofs of what God is doing through the Spirit, they “call evil good, and good evil . . . put darkness for light, and light for darkness . . . [and] put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20). As one commentator well says, “to be forgiven implies that the sinner be truly penitent. Among the Pharisees here described such genuine sorrow for sin is totally lacking.” He goes on to add:

For penitence they substitute hardening, for confession plotting. Thus, by means of their own criminal and completely inexcusable callousness, they are dooming themselves. Their sin is unpardonable because they are unwilling to tread the path that leads to pardon. For a thief, an adulterer, and a murderer there is hope. The message of the gospel may cause him to cry out, “O God be merciful to me, the sinner.” But when a man has become hardened, so that he has made up his mind not to pay any attention to the promptings of the Spirit, not even to listen to his pleading and warning voice, he has placed himself on the road that leads to perdition.<sup>2</sup>

This sin is not a *single* sin (such as murder), a *series* of sins (such as breaking all the 10 commandments), or even *succession* of a sin (persistence in a particular one). Rather this is a *state of mind* arrived at by the practiced refusal to acknowledge what God alone has accomplished through His Spirit.

## Examples of this Trait

Based upon the consideration of our text, we would submit that there are vivid examples of this trait of deliberate, calculated, and impudent unbelief.

*First*, consider Pharaoh (Ex. 1—14). Here was a man who had been given evidence after evidence, proof stacked upon proof of what God was doing. Through a series of plagues upon the entire land of Egypt, God gave irrefutable proof that He was saying, “Let My people go,” a phrase that appears nine times.<sup>3</sup> Could it have been clearer? A blind man could see it with a cane, as the expression goes. Yet, Pharaoh deliberately, defiantly, and determinately refused to relent.

In fact, no less than 14 times we read that Pharaoh’s heart was “hardened” (or “harden”).<sup>4</sup> In several of these instances, it is was actually God doing the hardening. This is significant because it demonstrates God’s response to man’s impertinence. In effect, God’s response is, “Very well, if you *wish* to be defiant, then you *shall* be defiant.”

While some Bible students are troubled by the fact that

God hardened Pharaoh's heart, implying that God was "unfair" or "harsh," they overlook what God said to Moses before the incident even began. In 3:19 we read, "I am sure that the king of Egypt *will not* let you go, no, not by a mighty hand." As John Gill writes, "Mighty hand" refers to "the mighty power of God displayed once and again, even in nine plagues inflicted on [Pharaoh]." Even with the evidence staring him in the face, Pharaoh would not relent, and *that* was unpardonable.

*Second*, does this not also help explain God's seemingly harsh judgment and destruction of the peoples of Canaan? Many Christians have wondered why God would command the children of Israel to annihilate whole cities of people, entire civilizations. The answer is quickly forthcoming when we read Joshua 2:9–11, where Rahab admits to the spies Joshua sent into Jericho:

I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt; and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites, that were on the other side Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom ye utterly destroyed. *And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt*, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath (emphasis added).

Word had spread quickly of what God had done for His people; the Canaanites had heard it, considered it, and even feared it, but they still rejected it. Case closed. As a result, they were beyond *pardon*, beyond *penitence*, and beyond even *pleading*. This scene was repeated throughout Canaan, as noted in 5:1. When people heard what God had done, their hearts "melted." The Hebrew here (*māsas*) literally pictures melting wax and so figuratively the dissolving of one's courage. People clearly heard but did not heed.

*Third*, consider again the judgment of Judah. As we explored back in our February TOT (#55), Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was following the same road to ruin as had Israel (the Northern Kingdom). This is, in fact, what makes Judah stand out. While Israel, of course, had seen God's mighty acts and willfully apostatized, Judah had the additional testimony of God's judgment on Israel. As we recall, while under Josiah's reforms the idols were *removed*, the temple *repaired*, and the worship of Jehovah *restored*, the people had not *repented*, had not turned to the Lord with their whole heart and soul. The only response to willful apostasy is judgment.

This is further substantiated by two other details. For one, God instructed Jeremiah on three separate occasions *not* to pray for the people (Jer. 7:16; 11:4; 14:11). What an indictment! After all, God listened when Moses interceded for sinful Israel (Ex. 32–33; Num. 14), and He had

allowed Abraham to pray even for the indescribably wicked city of Sodom (Gen. 18:23–33). Yet, He forbid Jeremiah to plead for Judah.

One other detail appears in the words of Hosea. While he prophesied to Israel, not Judah, the impact of his words are not lessened. In fact, they show that even Israel had gone too far to repent. Since Ephraim was the largest and strongest of the Northern Kingdom, it was used as a synonym for all Israel, so Hosea's words tell the tale: "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). Indeed, if Israel wanted to live like a harlot, God said in effect, "So be it. The warnings are over."

*Fourth*, King Herod the Tetrarch is a truly dramatic demonstration of the unpardonable sin. Mark 6:20 says something very enlightening about Herod:

Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

"Feared" is the Greek verb *phobeō*. It actually comes from a verb that does not even appear in the New Testament *phobomai*, which literally means "to flee" and was used mostly by Homer. Later it refers to the physical emotion of fear, terror, and anxiety. It sometimes means respect, awe, and reverence, as in veneration of the gods. It is, of course, from this word group that we get the English *phobia*, an irrational fear of something. Why did Herod fear John the Baptist? Because he *realized* Who John represented and *recognized* Who empowered him.

But Herod had a problem, namely, his desire to marry Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, unlawfully (Lev 18:16). So, Herod had to make a choice, and of course, he made the wrong one. It is Luke's account of this, however, that really paints the horrible picture:

But Herod the tetrarch, being reproved by [John] for Herodias his brother Philip's wife, and for *all the evils* which Herod had done, *Added yet this above all*, that he shut up John in prison. (Lk. 3:19–20, emphasis added)

Later, of course, Herod went on to have John beheaded simply to please the offended Herodias (Mk. 6:27). Ignoring the evidence of Who empowered John and disregarding what John said, Herod chose wrongly and willfully.

But that is not the end of Herod's story. Still racked by guilt, upon hearing of the spreading fame of Jesus, Herod cried in terror, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead; and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him" (Matt. 14:2). Still later, Herod even tried to kill Jesus (Lk. 13:31).

It is then that Herod's true unpardonable state is revealed when Jesus was brought before him. Luke 23:9 declares, "[Herod] questioned with [Jesus] in many words; but he answered him nothing." J. Sidlow Baxter masterfully concludes here:

The voice of God which had been knowingly and systematically silenced in [Herod's] life *will not speak any more!* In his rage and frustration, Herod now has Jesus "set at naught" by his soldiers, and "mocked"; but Jesus remains mute. The voice of God speaks no more. The man who *would not shall not* . . . Such is the unpardonable sin, and such is the process leading to it.<sup>6</sup>

*Fifth*, Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. In a replay of history, Jerusalem is again in the depths of sin. As Jeremiah did in his day, it is our Lord Himself who weeps this time:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and *ye would not!* Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. (Matt. 23:37–38, emphasis added).

Like the belligerent Pharisees in our main text, the nation itself was too far gone to repent. While some would come to believe at the Day of Pentecost, and while Israel will be grafted back into the "olive tree," a symbol of privilege (Rom. 11), many in that generation (and in our own) are unpardonable.

*Sixth* and finally, no passages could be more graphic of this unpardonable state than those in Revelation. Note first 6:15–17:

The kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

While openly acknowledging that the disasters they have been experiencing have come from God, most people during the Tribulation will defiantly refuse to repent. We read again in 9:20–21:

The rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts.

While by this time one-third of the earth's remaining population will have fallen to God's judgment, yet still, unimaginably, those that remain will not repent. In spite of years of indescribable suffering, tens of millions of deaths, coupled with the powerful preaching of the Gospel by the 144,000 Jewish evangelists (7:1–8), the two witnesses

(11:1–14), an angel in the sky (14:6–7), and other believers (Matt. 24:14), there will have never been a time in history that men were as defiant as they will be then. Finally, we read yet again in 16:10–11:

And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.

At this point, men's confirmed unbelief is total and complete. There comes a time when there is no more light, no more opportunity, and no more forgiveness.

### Exhortation to Think

Some people have been troubled by the thought of whether they have committed the unpardonable sin. But to even ask that question is proof positive that they have not. The person guilty of this sin would never ask, for he is beyond such a notion.

That said, however, this sin can indeed be committed today and is, in fact, committed often. How many evolutionists, for example, are in this state? They witness the wonders of the world but in belligerent arrogance reject the obvious, even going so far as ascribing the works of "the Spirit of God [who] moved upon the face of the waters" to a "big bang." Such willful unbelief was demonstrated to me when I read one evolutionist who said, "I believe in evolution because the only other alternative is creation, and I refuse to believe that."

It seems clear in each case we've examined that the unpardonable sin begins with *rejection* in the mind, which morphs into *rebellion* in the emotions, which ultimately hardens into the *refusal* of the will. This should encourage us in our evangelism to alert people that "now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2)? We should strongly warn them that to *postpone* is to quite possibly be beyond *pardon*.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Kittel (editor), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964; reprinted 2006), Vol. I, p. 621.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Baker, 1973), p. 529.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20, 21; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 4:21; 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17.

<sup>5</sup> *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* (electronic edition).

<sup>6</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter, *Studies in Problem Texts* (Zondervan, 1960, 1974), p. 127 (emphasis in the original).

*Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.*