

The Unforgivable Sin

This morning we take up the challenging words of Christ: “Assuredly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation”. Now, there is no doubt that this is a very tough verse to get our minds around for many reasons; not least of which, is the fact that it seems to impose stipulations and conditions on God’s forgiveness. This verse presents a real challenge to our confidence; it has the potential to shake our certainty and rob us of the peace of knowing we are forgiven no matter what. For, as it turns out, there is an unforgivable sin out there of which if we happen to fall into it will immediately cut us off from God’s grace. So devastating is this mysterious sin, we are told, that in the actual committing of it, we forfeit our claim to eternal life and are subject to eternal condemnation. The potential for anxiety over this grave sin is quite high because Christ gives us no further explanation about it. He simply calls our attention to this spiritual self-destruct button and then quickly moves on to another topic. But we who hear this cryptic message are left guessing as to just what this sin against the Holy Spirit might be, or worse yet, perhaps we have already committed it without even knowing we did so. So, let’s see if we can’t work out this dilemma because quite literally our salvation depends on us getting it right.

First of all, we must consider Christ’s audience. To whom is Christ issuing this warning? Not to the crowds, mind you, but specifically to the Pharisees. To the crowds, Christ speaks tenderly, compassionately—healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the troubled. To those who feel the sting of life, Christ is full of love and understanding. “Come to me all who are weary and I shall give you rest” is His abiding message to anyone, and everyone, who has been beaten down by the unfortunate circumstances of life. But to the Pharisees, Jesus’ tone is much different. It’s cold and off-putting. His wit is sharp, His demeanor is stern. His words are caustic. Christ knows His audience; He knows their hearts,

and their hearts have been turned against Him. The Pharisees had made it their mission to run interference on Christ's ministry, to work the crowds into a frenzy of rebellion against Him. Considering the audience, then, helps us to answer the pressing question as to the true nature of this unforgivable sin. The sin against the Holy Spirit is that willful ignorance embodied by the Pharisees; that deliberate ignorance, which refuses to be taught; that love of darkness, which refuses to admit the light. The Pharisees felt Christ's power. In their hearts, they were compelled to admit that His words were true words, that His works were good works. But His words were so much truer than their own that they found in them a rebuke of their ignorance, instead of an invitation to learn of Him; His works were so much greater than theirs that they found in them a reflection of their own incompetence, instead of an invitation to trust in Him. Christ humbled their vanity. He exposed their insincerity. And they hated Him for it; and, in their hatred, they affirmed words which they knew were true to be untrue, and attributed works which they knew to be good to the power and craft of the devil. They saw the light, and knew that it was light; and yet they loved darkness more than light, because their deeds were evil. They were deliberately sinning against the light, against conscience, against all that was true and right and good; in a word, they were sinning against the Holy Spirit; and so long as they did that, there was no hope for them. They were closing the heavenly window of the soul; and so long as they did that, how could any light from heaven shine into their souls? They were shutting the very door through which alone the Divine Influence could approach them; and so long as they did that, how could any Divine Influence reach them? If men will keep their eyes shut, how can they see? If they will stop their ears, how can they hear?

But all of this begs the question, "Where lies our danger in committing this sin against the Holy Spirit?" When is the warning of condemnation directed at us? We are guilty of this catastrophic sin whenever we consciously and willfully resist the Spirit of truth and goodness. In other words, whenever we see the truth of God and turn a blind eye; whenever we hear the truth of God and turn a deaf ear;

whenever we know the truth of God and turn away because it's too hard—the path too steep, the way too treacherous, the cost too high. For whenever we know what is good and yet do it not—because we love some evil way too much to leave it behind—we are no better than the Pharisees who always had their reasons for keeping Christ at arm's length; who went to bed each night satisfied with themselves having their smug self-righteousness to keep them warm. For the sin against the Holy Spirit is an outright rejection of the One who sent the Spirit. To know the Spirit, then, is to know Christ. To sin against the Spirit is to say 'NO!' to Christ's redemption. Christ alone has revealed the Spirit of Truth beside which there is none other, and above which there is none higher.

All of this to say there really is no sin that is unforgivable unless we choose to make it so by our own free-will. If you remember nothing else from this sermon remember this: the unforgivable sin has nothing to do with limitations placed on God's forgiveness, and everything to do with our own self-imposed limitations. It is not that God can't forgive the sin, it's that we don't want Him to forgive it. From God's perspective, there's no such thing as an unforgivable sin. It is we who freely fashion such a sin for ourselves and cling to it rather than let God be God. Hear me, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when I say that with the Lord there is abundant mercy and with Him there is plentiful redemption. This, of course, is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills