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Matthew 12:31 - 12:32



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg examines the notion of an "unpardonable sin" mentioned in Matthew 12:31-32. He suggests that the Bible teaches that there is such a sin, which occurs when a person's heart becomes spiritually numb and devoid of any concern for spiritual matters, rendering them unable to repent. This state of mind is characterized by an extreme hardness of heart, which is why speaking out against the Holy Spirit is considered an unpardonable sin. However, Gregg acknowledges that not all interpretations of this passage agree with his view.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 12, in verses 31 and 32, Jesus made a comment that has perplexed many ever since. Not only non-Christians have been perplexed by it, but even Christians have wondered exactly what it meant. And I myself will have to say that I can't be sure that I understand it fully.

However, it is my task on these programs to examine the life of Christ, the things he said and did, and to endeavor to give some explanation of them, and that is what we will attempt to do in today's session as well. In Matthew 12, verse 31, Jesus said, Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him. But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

Now, here Jesus differentiates between different kinds of sin. It seems clear. He talks about every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, but there is one blasphemy that will not be forgiven.

In fact, he said you can blaspheme against the Son of Man and be forgiven, but you cannot blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and be forgiven. Now, these words have led to a term that is not actually found in the passage, but Christians often use it. They speak of the unpardonable sin.

What is the unpardonable sin? And how do you know whether you've committed it or not? Unpardonable would mean if you've committed it, you will not be forgiven. You will

not be pardoned, and there's no hope for you. You just simply cannot be saved, because the hope of all men to be saved is the hope that God will pardon our sins.

You must realize, of course, that the only reason we're in trouble with God in the first place and need to be saved is because we are sinners, because we've rebelled against God, because God has laid out requirements for us to fulfill, and we have not done so. It's not as if God's laid out some unreasonable requirements, not at all. God has simply required that we not kill people and not commit adultery and not be self-centered and not steal or bear false witness and not dishonor Him and so forth.

The trouble is we've broken all those laws. You read what God wants from us, and it's simply to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. It's really not something that's an unreasonable request on His part, but we have rebelled.

We've gone our own way. We've chosen to serve ourselves rather than God, to please ourselves rather than God, and this has put us out of sorts with Him. It is the violation of God's commandments that is referred to in the Bible as sin, and therefore we all must confess that if you look at what the commandments of God are, you will have to admit that you've broken them, and therefore you have sinned.

And we know from the writings of the New Testament that the person who commits sin has a death sentence over him. Even the Old Testament says that. In Ezekiel 18, it says the soul that sins, it shall die.

And it says in the New Testament the wages of sin is death. Now, this being so, the only hope we have of salvation is that something can be done about our sins, and of course the Gospel tells us that one of the things Jesus came to accomplish was the forgiveness of sins, that He came to die in the place of sinful humanity, to take that death penalty on Himself for our sins so that we could be forgiven. And so the forgiveness or the pardon of sins is the essence of what it means to be made right with God and to be saved.

The reason that Christians believe that they will go to heaven and that others will not go to heaven has nothing to do with any arrogance on our part. Christians do not believe themselves to be better people than others, at least if they do, they're out of touch with reality. I'm a Christian.

I don't believe I'm better than somebody else. I won't argue that there aren't people worse than me. There probably are.

There certainly are people better than me, but my hope of heaven has nothing to do with being better than other people or anything like that. The hope of heaven is simply the hope that my sins will be forgiven, not because I deserve it and not because I haven't committed many of them and not because my sins have been minor. They have not.

My sins have been major sins, and I have no way of arguing that I deserve to be forgiven.

But the gospel tells us that God wants to pardon our sins. He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked would turn from his wicked ways and live and find forgiveness.

And the Bible teaches that that's one of the things that Jesus came to announce to us, is that God is there to forgive us. He wants to forgive us. And through Christ, he has found a means to do so without compromising his integrity.

Now, that being so, our hope of salvation is that we will be pardoned or that we have been pardoned of our sins. But Jesus here speaks of a sin that sounds as if he's teaching a doctrine of an unpardonable sin, because he talks about something he refers to as blaspheming the Holy Spirit or speaking a word against the Holy Spirit. And he says the person who does that will not be forgiven, neither in this age or in the age to come.

That sounds pretty exclusive. It sounds like you do this and you're out. You can't be in.

And if that is so, of course, then it behooves us to know, first of all, what is the unpardonable sin? And once we discover that, of course, the importance of knowing is to know whether we have committed it. Now, I'm not sure of what value it would be to us to know if we had committed it. Many people are very curious to know.

But if I had committed it, I really don't know what benefit I would have in knowing that I'd committed it. There's nothing I could do about it. If it is truly a sin that's unpardonable and I committed it, whether I know it or not, I can't help it.

There's nothing I can do to improve my lot. Someone might say, well, if my sins are unpardonable, it'll benefit me to know that, so I don't bother trying to get saved. I don't bother with religion.

I don't bother with Christ. I don't bother with righteousness because I can't be forgiven anyway. Although I wouldn't personally argue that way because I believe that there's benefit in righteousness, whether there's a heaven or not.

If there was no heaven to go to, there's still benefit to human beings in being good and being just and being merciful. But the point we're talking about is not benefit to us in the temporal and in the here and now, but the benefit of being right with God for eternity. And so, I've met many people and hear from people all the time asking me, what is the unpardonable sin? Is it possible that I've committed it? Am I beyond redemption? Well, it's, I guess, a worthy thing to be fearful about.

But the question is, does the Bible teach that there is an unpardonable sin? Now, on the surface, it certainly sounds like it. When Jesus says, blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men, in verse 31, or when he says, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him. To say that a man who does this will not be forgiven is generally understood to be saying that this sin is an unpardonable sin.

On the other hand, I believe the Bible teaches that the blood of Jesus can cleanse from all sin. That there is not a sin which Jesus will not forgive if a person will confess and repent of it. We know it says in 1 John 1, 7, if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.

And the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth us from all sins. John does not mention an exception. He says the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from all sin.

But that's if we're walking in the light, right? Now, in verse 9 of the same chapter, 1 John 1, 9, John says, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now, again, twice in one chapter he speaks of God cleansing us from all sin, from all unrighteousness by the blood of Christ. Now, both of those are contingent, of course, if we walk in the light and if we confess our sins.

It's clear that in order to be cleansed from all sin, we must repent of the sin. We must acknowledge that we've sinned. We must confess our sin, okay? But if we do that, John seems to indicate that all sin can be forgiven if it is repented of in that way.

Now, does that conflict with what Jesus said about there being a sin, that if people do it, they will not be forgiven? That depends. Jesus' words can be taken more than one way. To say that a man who does a certain thing will not be forgiven does not mean that that is a sin that God is so upset about that he simply refuses to forgive it.

It is also possible that it is saying a man who does such a thing as that will never do the thing necessary to obtain forgiveness and therefore will not be forgiven. Now, the thing necessary to do for forgiveness is to repent of your sins. You can't be saved if you don't repent of your sins.

If you repent and turn from your sin, then you'll be saved. But there is a condition of heart that people can obtain through stubbornness, through resistance of God over a long period of time, through refusal to acknowledge the truth. A person can come into the place of heart where he is spiritually numb, where he doesn't any longer feel conviction of sin, where he simply doesn't care about his soul or about spiritual things.

A person like that, of course, will never repent because he doesn't have the incentive to repent. He doesn't feel guilty. He doesn't care about spiritual things.

People can come to this state. The Bible talks about people in Romans chapter 1 whom God has given them over to a reprobate mind. A reprobate mind is one that is devoid of judgment, incapable of knowing the difference between right and wrong.

Well, if a person is in that condition, it is clear that they don't have any sensitivity about their sins. Certainly, they have no incentive to repent. They don't even acknowledge themselves to be doing what's wrong, much less care.

And a person who is in that state will never repent. And if they never repent, of course, they'll never be forgiven either. Now, when Jesus says a person who does such a thing will never be forgiven, obviously, he might be saying that the deed he has described is such a deed that God would be so offended that even if the person repented, God still wouldn't forgive them.

Now, that's one possibility. The other possibility is that Jesus is saying anyone who would do such a thing as this will never repent, and therefore, they won't be forgiven. It's not as if God wouldn't forgive them if they repented.

It's rather that they can't repent because their hearts have been hardened against God to the point that repentance is not even a consideration for them. They're a reprobate. They don't care about right and wrong.

They only care about their agenda. They're totally devoid of any spiritual concern, and therefore, they will not be forgiven for the simple reason that they will never repent. They'll never be motivated to repent.

Their hearts are too far from God. Now, I'm going to suggest that this second interpretation may be what Jesus has in mind. I'm suggesting it, and I say it may be because I must confess there have been many different interpretations that people have given of this question of what is the unpardonable sin, what is the blasphemy of the Spirit, and the way I understand it is one of several ways that people have taken it, and I'm not going to be dogmatic on this.

I'm going to say some better men than I may have a different opinion, but I'm going to suggest that Jesus may be saying this. There is a state of heart which a person can reach if they reject the truth long enough that they would do any indignity against God without any compunction of conscience at all. They could even look at the Holy Spirit in the face and say, You're the devil, and they would feel nothing.

Such people are spiritually so far gone that there's nothing really left for God's Spirit to appeal to in them. They have no conscience left. They've numbed it.

Any sense of right and wrong is history in their life, and they're never going to turn around. They're never going to repent, and such people, of course, will never be forgiven. And in the context, we know that that's what had happened.

In the verses just immediately before this, Jesus had cast a demon out of a man, and the Pharisees had said, Well, he's doing that by the power of the devil. Well, Jesus turned around and said in verse 28, No, I've done this by the power of the Spirit of God. Now, what this, of course, tells us is that Jesus was acting in the power of the Holy Spirit, and his critics were saying he was acting in the power of the devil.

Essentially, they were calling the Holy Spirit the devil. They were seeing what was done

by the Holy Spirit and said, That's the work of the devil. Now, if that isn't blaspheming the Holy Spirit, I'm not sure what would be.

To call him the devil would be a blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. And it seems to be that that's what Jesus is referring to here, to what they had just done. And in saying they will not have forgiveness, I don't believe that he's saying that the Holy Spirit is so unforgiving that even though Jesus will forgive you if you speak against him, the Holy Spirit won't forgive you for speaking against him.

I think probably what Jesus is saying is this, that you can speak against the Son of Man without really having been so hardened as to be totally against God. Because in Jesus' lifetime, his humanity was a stumbling block to some. There were things he was doing that some people who were good people still had trouble recognizing whether he really was the Messiah.

Think of John the Baptist was certainly a godly man and a prophet. And yet he had times where the things Jesus and his humanity did, he wasn't sure that was really measuring up with what the Holy Spirit had said and the prophets were supposed to be done. A person might stumble and have some struggles in accepting and might even at times be found saying a word critical of Jesus' activities and still not be a person who is totally against God.

That person might yet change his mind, might yet later see that Jesus was who he claimed to be. An early impression, a negative impression maybe early on in one's exposure to Jesus might yet turn around to something else and they might yet after his resurrection recognize that he is the Messiah and they could be forgiven of whatever they had said earlier against him. But for someone to recognize God, the Holy Spirit, for who he is and yet right in his face say, that is the devil, is a little different than that.

Because to look at God and say you're the devil means that a person has come to the point where they don't care about truth, they don't care about God, they don't care about being right or wrong, they just have an agenda. And the Pharisees who said this about Jesus, that was it, they just had an agenda. They didn't care about the truth.

In fact, I dare say they didn't really think that Jesus was operating through the devil. There is evidence, and we can't be too sure because the evidence can point different ways, there's different evidences for different positions, but there is some evidence that the Pharisees may have recognized that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, but that they didn't want him to stay around and they killed him. The story of the vineyard, where the keeper of the vineyard said, this is the heir, let's kill him and his inheritance will be ours.

This was a way in which Jesus, through a parable, exposed the motives of his critics and his enemies. And he may have been saying they know who he is. They recognize that he is the Messiah, they simply don't want him to be their Messiah.

They don't want to surrender their position of power to him. And therefore, although they know who he is, they will do anything they can to oppose him and destroy him. Now, if that's what Jesus is saying, then we're going to have to assume that the Pharisees who made these remarks about him working through Beelzebub, they didn't sincerely believe it was the work of the devil.

They were just trying to discredit him publicly in their heart of hearts. They knew better. They knew this was God.

They knew this was the work of the Spirit of God, but they didn't care. They wanted to discredit it anyway, and so they said it was the devil. To have such an attitude, I believe, is to exhibit a hardness of heart at an extreme degree.

A person whose heart is that hard, I suspect, is beyond concern about God and spiritual things, about truth. And that person is therefore not a candidate for repentance. That is, they're not capable of turning and repenting from their sin.

They don't have any motivation or incentive to do so. And therefore, they will never be forgiven, because they will never repent. Therefore, my theory is that Jesus was not here identifying some sin, which, apart from all other sins, was an unpardonable one, but he was commenting on the state of heart of his critics, who could say such things without any compunction, and thus demonstrate their hearts were so hard against God that forgiveness was not going to come to them, because they simply would not be capable of repenting with such hard hearts as those.

And he would not then be saying, you disciples of mine, watch out. There is a sin that if you do it, you just say the wrong words. You speak a word against the Holy Spirit, and you'll go to hell.

I don't think that could be true. God doesn't send people to hell and decide not to forgive them because they accidentally said the wrong combination of words. He will send them to hell because of where their heart is at.

Now, many times, of course, their words exhibit where their heart is at. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. And that was the case with these Pharisees.

What they said against the Holy Spirit showed where their heart was at. However, there are times that we speak, and it doesn't show that our hearts are opposed to God. We may simply be mistaken.

I think, for example, of people today who argue that speaking in tongues is not of God and that it's of the devil. Now, I personally believe that the Bible teaches there's a legitimate gift of speaking in tongues, and it's a gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, if some Christians mistakenly think that it's the work of the devil, and let's say they turn out to be wrong, and it's really the work of the Holy Spirit, is this the same thing as blasphemy

of the Holy Spirit? They're doing something that sounds similar.

They're looking at the work of God and calling it the work of the devil. But I think it's a little different, at least in some cases. I don't know about all.

But I do believe there are some sincere Christian people who love the Lord who are mistaken, and they sometimes mistakenly think that something is of the devil when it may in fact be of God. Such people are not necessarily spiritually parallel to the Pharisees in Jesus' day. They're not necessarily those who have committed a blasphemy that's unforgivable because I believe such people are making an honest mistake, and yet they really want to serve God.

I believe the Pharisees of whom Jesus was speaking here did not have any such honesty. They were not making an honest mistake. They saw the light, and they did not like the light.

Remember Jesus said about them on another occasion in John 9, in the closing verses of that chapter, he said, if you were blind, you would have no sin. In other words, I wouldn't hold you responsible for your errors if you were blind. He said, but because you say, we see, we see, therefore your sin remains.

What Jesus seems to be saying is, if you were truly in ignorance, like a blind person and couldn't see, then your sin would be mitigated. We might find some reason to wink at your transgression. There's a sense in which you would not be as responsible if you were truly ignorant.

But because you say, we see, and yet you oppose the light that you see, therefore your sin remains in full force. And so there is a difference, I believe, between the sins of those who mistake the work of God for the work of the devil, on the one hand, and the sin of those who know that it's the work of God, and nonetheless, in order to discredit it, will say it's the work of the devil, as the Pharisees did. In this case, I think that exhibits a great callousness of heart, a great insensitivity to spiritual things, and a great incapacity for experiencing the kind of conviction that leads to repentance.

This much can be said on biblical authority. Those who do not repent will not be forgiven. And yet I believe that if you do repent, no matter what sin you've committed, your sin will be forgiven.

I know of no sin in the Scripture which, if you repent of it, you will not be forgiven. There is no such sin named. If you confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

If you've worried about whether you've committed the unpardonable sin, then it's not likely that you have, because the very fact you worry about it or are concerned about it means that you are not spiritually dead and numb, as the Holy Spirit would not continue

to convict you if He had given up on you because you had done something unpardonable. Well, that's my best attempt at understanding these difficult words of Jesus. Some understand them differently.

Perhaps you do. But let's continue our study in the life of Christ next time as we go on through the Matthew Gospel.