

Sin That Leads to Death

The “unpardonable sin,” as this sin has been called, is also commonly known as “the sin against the Holy Spirit.” To describe a sin as “unpardonable” seems to contradict our Christian hope and certainty. After all, the essence of the Christian faith is the declaration that God would have all people to be saved, that is, to come home to Him, forgiven (1Tm 2:4).

In that light, how can there be an unpardonable sin?

Twice in the Gospels, the inspired writers remember our Lord’s reference to the unpardonable sin (Mt 12:31–32; Mk 3:29–30). Another key text is Heb 6:4–6. A final reference to the unpardonable sin is in 1 John, where the apostle describes that sin in a dreadful phrase, “sin that leads to death” (5:16). To understand what the unpardonable sin is, we need to understand the context of each of the passages noted above and how they relate to one another. We need to follow the interpretation principle “Let Scripture interpret Scripture.”

The Sin of the Scribes and Pharisees

Note the context of Mt 12:31–32; Mk 3:29–30. The scribes and Pharisees were accusing Jesus, saying He was empowered by Satan to do His miraculous works. To the Jew of Jesus’ day, the Holy Spirit had two great functions: He revealed God’s truth to humanity, and He enabled human beings to recognize that truth when they saw and heard it. (Both of these are, of course, truly the work of the Spirit.)

Now here was a situation in which the Son of God Himself clearly and visibly was overthrowing Satan and his kingdom, healing people who were demon-possessed. As people saw this demonstration of God’s love in action, God the Holy Spirit was at work in their hearts, leading them to acknowledge Christ as Savior and Lord (Mt 12:23).

But note the Pharisees’ deliberate and stubborn resistance to the Holy Spirit’s testimony (Mt 12:24).

The sin against the Holy Spirit, then, is the consistent and stubborn refusal to believe in Christ—deliberately opposing the Holy Spirit as He seeks to bring a person to faith through the message of Christ. The Pharisees’ opposition to the Spirit was so extreme that they attributed Christ’s work to the devil. By definition, this sin of the Pharisees could not be forgiven because by their unbelief they refused to receive the forgiveness God in Christ so winsomely offered to them.

Trampling the Blood of Christ Underfoot

Most crucial to the fullest understanding of the sin against the Holy Spirit is Heb 6:4–6, a passage that describes the horrible possibility of apostasy. We Christians have been enlightened, brought to faith in Christ, who is the light of the world (Jn 1:9; 9:5). We have tasted the heavenly gift and seen “that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). This is a gift that fills all of life as we are drawn to Christ on the cross. Christ does for us what we could never do for ourselves. His ransom of us from our sins takes on meaning for us today, as we see ourselves held hostage to the terrors of sin, death, and the flesh, unable to help ourselves until Jesus Christ helps us.

But since we have tasted the heavenly gift, we

- now see that our birth is not a biological accident but is God’s doing, as He calls us by name in our mother’s womb (Jer 1:5);
- now live in our baptismal grace, dying daily to sin and rising to the new life that is ours through Jesus’ death and resurrection (1Pt 1:3; Rm 6:3–4);
- now understand that Jesus Christ surrounds us with His good gifts and spirit, so that in the sun or in the shadow, in the rough or on the smooth, uphill or down, from life’s beginning to

Sin That Leads to Death

life eternal, we know His presence in the green valleys and in the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23);

- now realize that it is our privilege to share in the Holy Spirit, to taste “the goodness of the word of God,” and to experience in the here and now the “powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:5).

But at the end of this catalog of Christian blessedness comes a word about apostasy, about falling away, about that dreadful, terrible sin against the Holy Spirit. This passage was written in an age of Christian persecution, an age when, understandably, Christians came to consider apostasy the supreme sin.

But is any person beyond the mercy and forgiveness of God if, truly repentant, forgiveness is asked for? Is any person so strong and so alive in Christ that he or she can avoid all denial of Christ? Did not Peter himself deny Jesus? Did not Jesus Himself reinstate Peter (Jn 21:15–19)?

The cross has been described as a window to God’s heart. Through one historical event—Christ’s crucifixion—it has become possible for human beings in all times and places to look into God’s being, to see for certain that God’s suffering, enduring, patient, steadfast love is always available for sinners who want forgiveness and who repent.

“Have I Committed the Unpardonable Sin?”

The scriptural reference 1Jn 5:16–17 places on us the responsibility to pray for one another so that the sin whose end is death is not ours. In the original context, the “sin that leads to death” was probably the false teachers’ adamant and persistent denial of the truth and their shameless immorality. We, too, live in a time of false teaching, in the sense that people

- “know it all,” denying the truth of God’s Word in their lives;
- think that Jesus Christ was a good teacher or fine example but deny Him as Savior and Lord;
- live by their own rules, often shamelessly and without consideration for others.

If we are willing to pray for one another when we are ill and in need, should we not also pray for one another as we stray from God? But there is more to this concern than the praying. Our duty is not yet done until we see our prayers as reminders that God would use us as bearers of His grace.

So pray we must, and the will of God will be done. God wants no one lost eternally, and we want no one to live so persistently in sin that the end is eternal death. The sin against the Holy Spirit, the unpardonable sin, is that sin of impenitence that hardens into stubborn and persistent unbelief. No one who worries that he or she has committed this sin is guilty of it, for the hallmark of the sin is that one defiantly and without worry rejects any thought of need for repentance or faith. So we look to Christ as we pray for ourselves and for others: “[Lord,] I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24).¹

¹ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). [*The Lutheran Study Bible*](#) (p. 2181). Concordia Publishing House.