

Welcome

Good morning everyone. My name is Ashley and I'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. If you've been with us, you know we're talking about some of those hot-button questions we're often afraid to ask at church. Today, we're exploring the question of the unpardonable sin. Apparently, there's one sin that's so bad that if we do it, God won't forgive us.

That feels wrong on a lot of levels, not least because we claim God's love is infinite and all-encompassing and then Jesus goes and talks about an unforgivable sin. Definitely hot-button. Definitely, if we're being honest, pretty scary.

So can I tell you what helped me understand the unpardonable sin, and find how it's consistent with God's unending, limitless love for you and me?

The thing that helped me - and I hope will help you, too, is my husband's job in IT.

My husband is on call 24/7. So, we're sitting at the table eating dinner one night and he gets on his phone and I ask him if it's a work thing (because we try not to be on our phones at the table). He says yes, so I don't think much of it and keep eating and talking with our daughter. A few minutes go by and he starts laughing, so I ask him what's up and he shows me the string of messages between him and this person who reached out for help. It basically goes as follows:

Person: "Hey Jake it's so-and-so from this location and our computer that runs all of our machines won't come on and we're worried about the machines turning off while customers are here. Can you help?"

Jake: "Yeah, have you tried the power button?"

Person: *eye roll emoji* "yes, we tried that. It won't turn on."

Jake: "Is it plugged into the back of the computer? Or did it come unplugged from the wall?"

Person: "Oh... yeah it was just unplugged. Sorry about that. Thanks for the help"

We laugh, but I bet we've all had an issue with a computer where we're like "this just isn't working" and then someone else comes by and it's a simple solution and we feel a little silly for writing off a whole computer. What I think is most interesting, and what is applicable to our conversation today is that there was fundamentally nothing wrong with the computer. The computer was fully functional and operational, just not plugged into the source. I know for me it's pretty easy to have one thing wrong and then almost write off the whole thing, despite the possibility that it's just a simple fix.

Today we're going to use this idea to talk about the unpardonable sin, which is "blaspheming the Holy Spirit," and is often looked at as God's great "loophole." Like, God needed an out "just in case" and that's how a lot of people view the unpardonable sin. I'm going to tell you now, that's not what this is, but we'll get into it more as we discuss it today.

What I'm also going to tell you that I hope is an idea you'll hold onto throughout the discussion this morning is this: there is nothing that will ever get in the way of God loving you. There is *always* an opportunity for you to turn back to God and be healed. Let's begin by celebrating God's great love and faithfulness to us this morning as we worship.

Message

This summer, we're putting your questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began last week by looking at how we know God. Today, we've got a question that hits at our experience of God's goodness. Let's look at the questions guiding us today: **What about the unpardonable sin!?** And **Do we have to worry about death if we've never been baptized?** So, we're going to start with the unpardonable sin and then we'll deal with the second question. I think you'll find they fit together once you start talking about them more than they look like at face value.

So, what is the unpardonable sin and where does it come from? Earlier I said it's "blaspheming the Holy Spirit," but where did we get that from?

Turn with me over to [Mark 3](#).

This is a story from early in Jesus' ministry. He's already gained a reputation as a powerful healer and teacher. And, particularly in Mark's gospel, Jesus has made one specific work a pillar of his ministry: exorcism. That's right... in Mark, Jesus is becoming famous for his power over demons. What does that have to do with the unpardonable sin? Let's start by looking at verses 28-29. There, Jesus says:

“I tell you the truth, all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences.” -- Mark 3: 28-29 (NLT)

Well - there it is. That seems pretty straightforward to me. I guess it makes sense that there's something that has eternal consequences, but also, I have so many questions. Why *just* the Holy Spirit? Why not say this about Jesus or God the Father, or at least all three? Also, what does that even mean really? Blaspheme is such a weird word and it sounds bad but again, in this command, what does it actually mean?

Beyond that, what does it even mean to say that there's a sin that's unforgivable?! When I read these verses, I have to be honest: that doesn't sound like the Jesus that I know. If one of the Pharisees came to the Jesus I know earnestly said that they might believe Jesus and believe in what he was doing, then I have no doubt in my mind that Jesus would accept them wholeheartedly and with no question.

So, how does Jesus warning us about an unforgivable sin fit with the Jesus that we know that has endless love, forgiveness, and faithfulness to us? Well let's look at the story that these verses fall out of. The larger story that this comes out of is Mark 3: 20-30. Remember: in Mark, Jesus is an exorcist! I'm sure a lot of you guys actually didn't know that (I know I didn't) and I think that speaks a lot to how often this is taken out of context.

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon he and his disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. “He's out of his mind,” they said.

But the teachers of religious law who had arrived from Jerusalem said, “He's possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That's where he gets the power to cast out demons.”

Jesus called them over and responded with an illustration. “How can Satan cast out Satan?” he asked. “A kingdom divided by civil war will collapse. Similarly, a family splintered by feuding will fall apart. And if Satan is divided and fights against himself, how can he stand? He would never survive. Let me illustrate this further. Who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger—someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house.

“I tell you the truth, all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences.” He told them this because they were saying, “He's possessed by an evil spirit.” -- Mark 3: 20-30 (NLT)

Jesus is teaching And the Pharisees come up and try to say that the only reason Jesus is able to cast out demons is because Jesus is the prince of demons. And then Jesus responds by following that logic to its end. So, the prince of demons sent demons to people, but that same prince of demons is casting them out....? Like, that doesn't make sense at all.

So, this conversation between them begs the question, why did the Pharisees have such a problem with Jesus casting out demons? One would think, as the religious leaders of the time, and therefore those leading/caring for the people, that they would be pro-exorcism?

They are threatened by Jesus. A lot of people are flocking to Jesus and clamoring to hear his teachings, and on top of that, the Pharisees can't disagree that Jesus has some kind of power going on. So, what is the next best response? If we can't deny the power, then we'll just discredit him instead. So, that's what they do. They try to discredit his power by attributing it to something to be afraid of, rather than something good.

And if we know that when Jesus says the bit about blaspheming the Holy Spirit, we know he's speaking directly to what the Pharisees are doing here. That still begs the question though, what is "blaspheming the Holy Spirit"? Like what does that even mean?

The definition of blaspheming is this: to attribute the Spirit's power to something else.

Oh. So it's not saying something bad about Jesus. And it's not saying something bad about God the Father. It's not even talking crap about all three of them... Why is THAT the great unpardonable sin? Why is that the big bad wolf that we have to be afraid of accidentally doing? Honestly, to me it seems like there are a LOT of other things that are way worse than just...plagiarism basically. Like.... Murder... or like literally anything else, so why is THIS the ultimately unforgivable thing? Is the Holy Spirit just like, really sensitive, or what?

Turn with me over to John 16. We're going to look at what we're told is the role of the Holy Spirit. We were in these passages not too long ago, so you may remember some of this. Starting in verse 8, it says:

And when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. - John 16: 8-9 (NLT)

Okay, here are the things we know: the holy spirit is with us to show us where we need to improve (conviction), conviction leads to transformation, and blaspheming the holy spirit is to attribute that power to something else (and therefore not listen to it). So, if we put all of that together, what happens? Blaspheming is the "unforgivable" sin because if you refuse to believe in the one that can forgive/transform you, then you will never be forgiven.

Remember that analogy at the beginning with the computer? That's a great analogy here because the *only* issue is that the computer was unplugged. There wasn't something fundamentally that changed with the computer that made it to where it would never work again. It was just unplugged.

So, in the situation with the pharisees and Jesus, it goes kind of like this:

Jesus is working on a computer that's plugged in. So, he's able to turn it on and get on the computer, maybe open solitaire, or the calculator. Check his email, etc. There is a pharisee sitting next to him on their own computer and theirs is unplugged. And seeing all that Jesus can do that they can't, they're like "ahhh witchcraft!!!" and Jesus is like.... No... just plug your computer in and then you can do all this stuff. And then Jesus tells them if they don't plug it in, then it won't ever work.

Because again, if that pharisee had turned to Jesus and said help me, Jesus' response would not have been "well.. I mean, sucks to suck." No, just like when Nicademus the Pharisee came to Jesus, Jesus would have helped that person "plug their computer in."

And *that* is certainly worth celebrating. We're going to sing another song before talking about the other part of this question. The only thing that's keeping you disconnected from God is YOU. God is here with us. God brought you here to worship today. And the Holy Spirit - the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead! - is working in your spirit right now. Don't brush that way. Don't explain it as indigestion or coincidence or getting caught up in the moment. Respond.

In fact, let's all take some time now to breathe in of the Spirit's good work in our lives. Let's sing together!

SONG

We just saw that nothing can separate us from God's love except our own choice to reject God. So, lets turn to the other question for today. **Do we have to worry about death if we've never been baptized?** And the reason these two questions have been put together is because they have a similar root fear: what if I die and I did this thing that will cause God to no longer love me anymore and I'm dead and can no longer do anything about it?

Well i'm going to tell you right now about this baptism thing; there's nothing that is going to separate you from God's love for you. Period. And in the case of this baptism question, it actually happens in the gospels, so we know exactly what Jesus would do. Turn with me to Luke 23 -

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!"

But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom."

And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." - Luke 23: 40-43 (NLT)

Here, we find Jesus talking to the 2 criminals that are ordered to be crucified with him. It's important to clarify here that after this exchange, before Jesus tells the criminal he'll be with Jesus in paradise, nobody took him down and baptized him. No, Jesus tells the man that his faith is enough. Case closed. And it's also not like Jesus hemmed and hawed about it. Like, "oh i'm really not supposed to do this, but *I guess*". No, his faith was enough. Boom. Done.

So, if we *know* that there are no eternal consequences to baptism, then the question is... Why is it even important? Well, think about rings in a marriage. You have rings in a marriage as a sign that you are married, but it's not some kind of barrier to entry.

Now, if you went to your partner and proposed the wearing of rings to signal to everyone that you're married and they were adamantly against it... well, that would be a little sus, right? And you'd kind of feel like.... Are you committed to this relationship? Like... why do you have a problem with a sign to other people that you are in this relationship?

Baptism is the same way - it's a marker of the relationship that you have with Jesus, but it's not that you didn't have a relationship with Jesus before you were baptized. Just like you were probably with someone before you got married and had rings on your fingers.

We often want to over complicate our relationship with God, but here is the reality: there is nothing that stands between us and God's love. Nothing. Yet somehow we still try to work to compensate for some wrongdoing that we're afraid will keep us from God's love. Well, i'm here to tell you that there is no wrong doing that is going to keep you from God, especially if you're allowing the conviction of the Holy Spirit in your life.

I'm sure many of us have fallen into the trap of "there is something wrong with this computer and I can't figure out what it is, so i'm just going to throw the whole thing out." Or, we try to figure out all of these really complicated things that could be wrong with the computer without checking the first thing, which is to see if it's even plugged in. Right?

So, the question is, what helps to keep us plugged in? What can we do if we're not feeling connected? Well, spiritual practices are a great one. There are pamphlets in the foyer about spiritual practices, like sacred reading and like giving for those in the building. For those online, there is a link to the spiritual practices guide in the links below the video.

Examen + Communion

As we move into a time of communion, I would beg you to remind yourself of this simple truth when you have questions similar to these - that there is nothing that will separate you from God's ability or willingness to love you. At the communion meal with his disciples, Jesus didn't say, "if you do all of these things exactly right, then I will allow you to be apart of this Kingdom." So, as we move into a time of reflection and communion, I'd ask that you remember that God's

love is not more complicated than that. The only thing standing in the way of God's love and forgiveness is you. Are you plugged in?

As we move into a time of reflection we're going to ask some questions and prayerfully reflect on them. Then, I will pray for us and we will receive communion together.

In the past week, what has kept me unplugged from God?

In the past week, how have I felt being unplugged from God?

In the coming week, how can I incorporate a spiritual practice into my life to help me get plugged in?

In the coming week, how is God inviting me to plug in?

Prayer

God, we thank you for being here with us. We thank you for loving us, even when we feel scared or afraid, and even when we overcomplicate your love for us. We ask that your presence might feel stronger with us as we leave today, helping to remind us of our goals for being plugged in to you. We pray that this communion meal would provide a spiritual nourishment for us as we go back out into a world that finds endless love to be unbelievable. We pray that that spiritual nourishment would provide sustenance that plugs us back into you. We ask all of this in your name.

Communion

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus broke bread with his disciples and said, "this is my body, broken for you. Take it and eat it." And when they had finished the meal, he took a cup of wine and he said, "this is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Take it, and drink it." And so we too, eat and drink, and remember his death until he returns.

Benediction and homework:

read Romans 8 via sacred reading

Benediction: As you go, may the Holy Spirit be in front of you to guide you, beside you to walk with you in any hardships, and behind you to support you. Go in the grace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We'll see you next week!