

WHAT IS THE UNFORGIVABLE SIN?

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In my work as a psychotherapist, one of the most painful things I encounter is when a person is having the experience that they have done something unforgivable. Most often, in my experience, the pain of this is not particularly based in religious concerns. In fact, it is usually an experience of having done something that the person cannot forgive him or herself for. Extra-marital affairs sometimes present themselves this way: “I’ve done this, I know I can never tell my spouse because it would cause too much pain, so I just have to live with the guilt of it – *and I will never forgive myself.*” It is not unusual for someone like this to say, “What I have done is unforgivable.” How I work with the person in therapy can go in many different directions depending on the specifics of the case, but my goal is always to heal the sense that something indelible and unredeemable exists in the person’s life, and to help them to see that what they are living with is entirely internal. There has been no dialogue, no communication, no opportunity for healing. The person has drawn a conclusion that they are unforgivable completely on their own.

This is even more painful when a person has concluded that they are unforgivable in God’s eyes. In these cases, too, though, I almost always find that the person has come to this conclusion completely on their own. I am honestly thankful that they have found their way to me if for no other reason than that they are finally no longer alone with their pain. In these cases, too, there has almost never been any kind of conversation about whether what they have done can be forgiven – certainly not with God.

What I find in these cases is typically that the person has a vague, general idea that the Bible says something about an unforgivable sin, but has no idea at all what the particulars are. It can be a terribly frightening concept, again, especially when one has been alone with it for a long time.

Our Gospel text today contains Mark’s version of the primary New Testament text in which the concept of an unforgivable sin is addressed. Let’s take a close look at the passage and see what we find.

It is early in Jesus’ ministry. He has just appointed his twelve disciples, and immediately afterwards, there are four words that are not included in our lectionary text, though they are part of the same sentence with which it begins. The words are: “Then he went home.” (Mark 3:19c) This is Jesus’ family’s first close contact with him since he had begun to do amazing things and attract a large following; and what we learn is that his family seems to believe what “people were saying”: “He has gone out of his mind.” (Mark 3:21cd) The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem, who were also present at this crowded scene in and outside Jesus’ home, took it a step further: “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he has cast out demons.” (Mark 3:22bc) **This** is the statement that Jesus calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It is the accusation that Jesus has an unclean spirit, that he is doing his miraculous works by Satan’s power, that Jesus calls an eternal sin. (Mark 3:29)

There is a very interesting and important matter for us to observe here. As one commentary points out, “although we ask of the extraordinary, ‘Did it really happen?’ The Scriptures ask, ‘Who did it?’ ” (*Preaching Through the Christian Year*, Year B, p. 304) The possibility, and indeed the occurrence, of miracles are not questioned. The terrible sin that the scribes

committed here, then, was attributing the powerful acts that Jesus was doing to Satan, rather than to the Holy Spirit. This sin, and only this sin, Jesus says, is unforgiveable.

To really understand it, we have to put ourselves into the context of the New Testament period, and remember that the existence of an unseen world was widely assumed. This unseen world, which included both good and evil, was believed to be powerful. So again, people in the New Testament period did not tend to doubt miraculous things when they happened; they would tend to ask, what is *behind* these miraculous things? Our Gospel lesson today occurs at a time when a great groundswell of people was beginning to believe in the absolute uniqueness of Jesus as one whose preaching and teaching and healing were direct expressions of the presence and power of the Spirit of God. Some were greatly threatened by this and responded with blasphemy.

Now this is a very serious matter, to be sure. But it is certainly the case that the fears about having committed an unforgiveable sin that I described at the beginning of the sermon are not anything like what our Gospel text is describing. It really is the case that there is no human action or behavior that God does not stand ready to heal and forgive. It is only when a person has slipped so far into darkness as to deny the love of God and actually call that love evil that forgiveness is not possible. So really, it comes down to this: once the source of forgiveness is being denied and thought of as evil, then of course forgiveness is not possible. But instances of this are rare indeed.

I once read somewhere, and will always remember, these wise words: “If you are worried that you have committed the unforgiveable sin, you definitely haven’t committed it.” The worry itself – the fear, the guilt, the shame – are all indications that there is a healthy conscience at work. Where there is a healthy conscience, there is a belief in goodness. And where there is a belief in God’s goodness, the door to forgiveness is always open.

Are you excited about who Jesus is? Would you crowd the doorway of his house if you had the opportunity? Do you believe that he embodies the presence and power of the goodness of God? Then take heart and embrace the peace of God: forgiveness is yours, now and for eternity.