

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 5

The Rejection of the King

Matthew Chapters 11-12

Outline of These Chapters

- 1A. Jesus and John the Baptist (11:1-19)
 - 1B. John the Baptist's Doubts (11:1-6)
 - 2B. John the Baptist's Greatness (11:7-11)
 - 3B. John the Baptist's Rejection (11:12-19)
- 2A. Jesus Denounces the Cities That Saw His Mighty Works (11:20-24).
- 3A. Jesus Reveals Himself to Some and Not to Others (11:25-27).
- 4A. Jesus' Great Invitation (11:28-30)
- 5A. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-8).
- 6A. Jesus Heals on the Sabbath and then Heals Many Others (12:9-21).
- 7A. The Unpardonable Sin (12:22-32)
 - 1B. The Healing Which Sparked Controversy (12:22)
 - 2B. The Response of the People (12:23)
 - 3B. The Response of the Pharisees and Their Accusation (12:24)
 - 4B. The Lord Answers Their Unreasonable Accusation (12:25-30).
 - 5B. The Unpardonable Sin Defined and Explained (12:31-32)
- 8A. An Evil Heart Brings Forth Evil Words (12:33-37).
- 9A. The Sign of the Prophet Jonah (12:38-40)
- 10A. A Greater than Jonah and a Greater than Solomon (12:41-42)
- 11A. The Last State is Worse than the First (12:43-45).
- 12A. Jesus Identifies Those To Whom He is Closely Related (12:46-50).

John the Baptist Doubts the Messiahship of Jesus.

As Matthew chapter 11 opens, John the Baptist is in a prison dungeon. According to Matthew 4:12 and 14:3-4, John the Baptist had been taken into custody by King Herod Antipas ("that fox" as Jesus called him in Luke 13:32). John the Baptist had been locked up in the gloomy fortress of Machaerus, located about five miles east of the Dead Sea and fifteen miles south of its northern tip. The prison was part of one of the Herodian palaces.

Though his imprisonment must have been a grim ordeal, John was allowed to receive visitors, and from these he had learned about the activities of Jesus. The reports which John heard did not harmonize with what John had expected the Messiah to do. For example, in Matthew 3:11-12 John had predicted that the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, but neither the Spirit baptism nor the fire baptism (judgment) had yet taken place. Also John was aware of numerous Old Testament prophecies which spoke about the Messiah ruling and reigning on earth, bringing about peace, regathering Israel back into the land, etc. None of these things had yet happened.

John's doubts were reasonable. John's concept and expectation of the Messiah did not correspond to what he had heard concerning our Lord's ministry. Many of the Old Testament Messianic predictions spoke of Christ's coming in glory and judgment to set up His earthly kingdom. No doubt this is what John expected, but he was not seeing these things being fulfilled by Christ. The fact that John sent his disciples to the Lord indicates his respect for the Person and authority of Jesus. His doubts did not result from unbelief, but rather from misunderstanding. Because the Lord's ministry did not match John's total concept of Messiahship, he was in need of assurance. John's disciples confronted the Lord with John's question at a time when the Lord was performing many miracles of healing (Luke 7:21).

Rather than give a yes or no answer, the Lord sent the disciples back to John to report what they had heard and seen. The Lord gave John the responsibility to answer his own question. John knew the Old Testament Scriptures, and with the help of Jesus he realized that the healing miracles of Jesus did harmonize with the Messianic predictions (see Isa. 35:5-6; 61:1). Hence, John is given assurance that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord's miracles providing compelling proof. If Isaiah 35:5-6 was being fulfilled, then this would also give John assurance that the other prophecies about the Messiah would also be fulfilled, even if they had not been fulfilled yet. John's misunderstanding was that he expected too much to be fulfilled at once. The Lord was encouraging him to be satisfied with what was being fulfilled at that present time. "He is not to let the absence of certain works blind him to the glorious presence of the works now in full progress. Let him be satisfied with these and trust that in due time the others will follow just as these are now being done" (Lenski, *Matthew*, p. 429).

The Lord Jesus had given sufficient proof, not only to John, but to all the Jewish people that He was indeed the Messiah. They could never say, "Don't blame us, we never had any reason to know that He was the Messiah!" They had the evidence before their eyes but they rejected it! Thus they were culpable (to be blamed). The controversy about who Jesus really was reached a peak in Matthew 12 when the Lord performed an amazing healing miracle (Matt. 12:22). Christ demonstrated that He was the Messiah and the people recognized this (see Matt. 12:23 where "Son of David" is a Messianic title because the Jews knew that the true Messiah would be a descendant of David). The Pharisees, however, rejected His Messiahship in spite of abundant proof, and claimed that He performed His miracles by the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

The works of Christ pointed out **who He was** and bore testimony to Him. There were many voices in that day saying all kinds of things about Jesus which were off base and contrary to truth and reality. If we listen to the crowd then we are certainly going to miss out on hearing God.

It might be appropriate to ask the students who they really think Jesus Christ is, and have them defend their answers. For example, if they say He is the Son of God, ask them how they know this. Oh what basis are they able to conclude that He is the Son of God? Is it because they have always been told this by parents, Sunday School teachers, pastor, etc.? They need a better basis than that!

In Matthew 11:7-11 we have some remarkable statements which the Lord made concerning John the Baptist. He was a prophet, yes (v.9), but he was "more than a prophet" (v. 9). He was the Lord's messenger who prepared the way for the Messiah (v. 10) . Among those born of women there have not been any greater than John the Baptist (v. 11). This is an amazing statement when we consider such great men as Moses, David, Daniel, Joshua, Job, etc. This is a remarkable statement in itself, but the next statement is even more amazing: "he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (v. 11).

The Greatness of John the Baptist

Let's think first about John's greatness. Jesus made an amazing statement: "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a _____ than _____ the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11). Consider the following points:

- 1) Before he was ever born his greatness was predicted (Luke 1:15, a prediction made by an angel).
- 2) John was a great and godly man, but he must stand out in some unique way because there were many great and godly men in the Old Testament.
- 3) John was not only a prophet, but one whose arrival on the scene of history had been prophesied by other prophets (Malachi 3:1 ; Isaiah 40:3). He was

the only prophet appointed as the forerunner of the Messiah. All of the other prophets said, "He's coming." John was different. He said, "He's here!"

- 4) John beautifully fulfilled his task as the forerunner of the Messiah. He did exactly as a herald must do. He pointed faithfully and consistently to the One who was much greater than he (Matt. 3:11; John 1:27-30).
- 5) John receded to the background when the One whom he introduced fully arrived on the scene, and his motto was "He must increase; I must decrease" (John 3:30). The Lord Jesus, in describing the nature of true greatness, always linked it with humility. See Mark 10:42-43.

How then do we explain the fact that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John? (See our Lord's remarkable statement in Matthew 11:11.)

This statement must be referring to "positional greatness" rather than actual greatness of character. Those who have been placed into the kingdom enjoy a position of greatness which far exceeds that which belonged to John. It's one thing to point to Christ (and no one pointed to Christ better than John) but it is quite another thing to be "in Christ" and to enjoy a "ye in Me, and I in you" relationship (John 14:20), which was never true of those living in John's day or before.

We need to make a careful distinction between one's **position** and one's actual **condition** (the difference between one's standing and state). The actual spiritual condition and walk of one in the kingdom might not measure up at all to John's humble walk and righteous life (John's walk puts most of us to shame), but positionally the believer who lives on the other side of the cross is on a far higher plane.

The Rejection of the Forerunner and Christ (Matthew 11:16-19)

John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ were both rejected by Israel. John's preaching was very convicting and cut to the heart (Matt. 3:1-12). People even accused John of being demon possessed (Matt. 11:18). People accused the Lord Jesus of being a glutton (one who eats too much) and a winebibber (one who drinks too much) and they felt He contaminated Himself by associating with sinners (Matt. 11:19).

The unbelieving Israelites were likened to dissatisfied children playing a game (Matt. 11:16-17). "The Jews are likened to children arguing about which game to play. Children are great mimics, and their games reflect the social activities of their parents. The game organizers suggest that they play wedding, where there was much joyful music and dancing....The suggestion of wedding was unacceptable to their companions, so they suggested funeral, with the mimicking of the paid mourners, but the group of children were unwilling to accept either game" (*The*

King of the Kingdom of Heaven—A Commentary on Matthew by Thomas Figart, p. 226).

John was represented by the funeral game. He lived an ascetic life in the wilderness, followed a strict diet (which included locusts!), wore coarse clothes (made of camel's hair!) and he did not socialize in a normal way. He kept to himself and when people came to him he preached convicting messages about repentance and future judgment. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus was represented by the wedding game. The Lord Jesus attended feasts and weddings (John 2) and He would freely eat and drink (although not to excess). He also associated with tax collectors and sinners, because this is the reason He came into the world (see 1 Tim. 1:15). However, He never condoned or approved of sinful behavior. The Jews were not satisfied either way. They rejected John and his lifestyle, and they rejected Christ and His lifestyle. As W. H. Griffith Thomas said, "They would not repent with John nor rejoice with Jesus" (*Outline Studies in Matthew*, p. 158).

The Lord Upbraids the Cities (Matt. 11:20-24).

The word "upbraid" (Matt. 11:20) means to reproach, to criticize severely, to rebuke.

The Lord Jesus performed His greatest miracles in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum yet they would not repent. The people of these cities were privileged to witness the ministry of the very Son of God in their midst. They watched as the Father authenticated the Lord's Person and message by mighty works and amazing miracles. Yet they would not repent. The people were deaf to His warnings, indifferent to His works and they sinned against great light. God holds us responsible according to the light which has been given to each one of us: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48). It is not a question of wickedness but rather it is a question of what they did with what they had. This same principle sheds much light on the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:22-32), as we shall see.

What privileges and advantages did the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum have that the wicked cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom did not have (see Matt. 11:21,23).

If Christ had come to earth earlier in human history and had performed His earthly ministry in the wicked cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom, what would have happened (Matthew 11:21,23)? _____

(Note: Christ is omniscient. He even knows what would have happened if things had been different. He knows all contingencies.)

In the day of judgment, would you rather be an ex-citizen of Sodom or an ex-citizen of Capernaum (Matt. 11:23-24)? _____

Why will the one be judged more severely than the other?

The principle of judgment is this: "to whom much is given, much also is required." With more light comes more responsibility. God will hold you accountable and responsible for what He has given to you. The unsaved person in America who has a Bible on his bookshelf and who lives right next door to a gospel preaching church is more accountable than the person who lives in some isolated village in Africa where there is no gospel witness. Both have light and both are accountable, but the one in America has more light.

Another example: Think of two men in a church. This is not a Bible believing church, but a church that denies the great fundamentals of the faith. One of the men sits in the pew and listens to the weekly sermons. Another man preaches from the pulpit each week, but he never preaches the gospel and never helps people understand how to be saved. In light of James 3:1, which of these two men will receive the greater judgment?

The more we have been given, the more we are responsible for. Apply this principle to the students. They need to understand the principles involved in these verses and how they apply even to them. Have them think about all that they have been given: a Bible, a Bible believing church, a free country, a Pastor who preaches the Word every Sunday, teachers, believing parents, etc. What are they doing with what they have? It is a wonderful thing to have light and truth, but we need to respond in the right way to the light and truth that we have.

Jesus Reveals Himself to Some and Not to Others (Matt. 11:25-27)

God reveals Himself to "babes," not to the "wise and prudent." The things of God are hidden from the wise and prudent (Matt. 11:25).

The great truths about the Person of God are hidden from the wise of this world (the "know it alls", the proud, those who think they have the answers, those who think they know more than the Bible, etc.). Instead, these things are "revealed unto babes" (literally "sucklings"—compare Matthew 21:16). Babes or sucklings are those who drink milk, not solid food (see 1 Cor. 3:1 and Heb. 5:13, where the term "babes" is used negatively as a rebuke to believers who have not grown up as they should). In Matthew 11:25 "babes" is not used in a negative sense, but in a positive way. Babes are those who are utterly dependent. Spiritually they are those who humbly confess their own nothingness, their emptiness and helplessness, and who are thoroughly aware of their absolute dependence upon the might and mercy of the Heavenly Father. They trust that from Him they will receive whatever is necessary, so that, enjoying salvation full and free, they may live lives of gratitude to His glory.

God cannot be known apart from special revelation (Matt. 11:27). God must open our eyes to these spiritual realities. If you do not know the Father then you will not know the Son. If you do not know the Son, then you cannot know the Father. To

know One is to know the Other. God is the One who must make Himself known. We must make sure we humble ourselves before the Lord so that we are in the place where He might make Himself known to us. Compare Matthew 16:16-17 where we learn that Peter knew about Christ's true identity only because it was revealed to him by the Heavenly Father.

Jesus' Great Invitation (Matt. 11:28-30)

God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are in perfect balance. In Matthew 11:27 we learn that no one can know the Son and no one can know the Father unless it is revealed to him. But God wants to be known! God desires that all men be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). In Matthew 11:28-30 we learn that there is a way to know Him! The great invitation is given to come to Him, to learn of Him, to yoke up with Him, to **commit** and **submit** to the Lord Jesus. His burden is light and it should be a delight.

"Come unto Me" (verse 28) is an invitation to salvation. We can rest in Him and in His finished work. "Learn of Me" (learn from Me) is a call to discipleship. Once we have a personal relationship with Christ we then enter into a learning process that lasts a lifetime.

The careful Bible student must make a difference between salvation and discipleship:

SALVATION	DISCIPLESHIP
Salvation is free and "without price" (Rom. 6:23; Isa. 55:1), although salvation is certainly <u>not</u> cheap (1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 Cor. 6:20).	Discipleship is costly and the cost must be counted (Luke 14:25-33).
Salvation takes place in an instant of time (Acts 2:47).	Discipleship is a life-long process (John 8:31; Matthew 28:19-20).
Salvation is believing on Christ (Acts 16:30-31).	Discipleship is following Christ (Matt. 4:18-22) and learning from Him (Matt. 11:29).
Salvation is coming to Christ and finding rest from the burden of sin (Matthew 11:28).	Discipleship is taking Christ's yoke and learning from Him (Matthew 11:29).
Salvation involves Christ loving me (Rom. 5:8; Gal. 2:20; John 3:16).	Discipleship involves me loving Christ (Matthew 10:37).
A truly saved person is one who believes the gospel (Rom. 1:16; 6:17).	A true disciple is one who continues in Christ's Word (John 8:31).

To be saved a person must fall before the feet of Christ crucified and claim the mercy of God (Luke 18:13).	To be a disciple a person must sit at the feet of Christ and hear His Word with a meek and teachable heart (Luke 10:39).
A saved person is a believer (1 John 5:1).	A disciple is a learner [the word "disciple" means "a learner, student, pupil, adherent"].
A saved person confesses Christ (Rom. 10:9-10).	A disciple denies self (Luke 9:23).
A saved person possesses Christ (1 John 5:12).	A true disciple forsakes possessions (Luke 14:33).
Being saved involves trusting (Eph. 1:13).	Being a disciple involves training (Matt. 28:19-20).
Salvation involves receiving God's gift (John 1:12; Eph. 2:8-9).	Discipleship involves receiving God's instruction (Acts 2:42).
Every believer measures up to the full demands of God's righteousness in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21).	Believers often do not measure up to the full demands of discipleship (Luke 14:25-33).
Salvation involves one's standing in Christ (one's perfect position in Him).	Discipleship involves one's state (one's actual practice or condition).
With salvation the emphasis is upon what God has done (1 Cor. 15:3-4).	With discipleship the emphasis is upon what man must do (Luke 14:25-33).
The focus of salvation is upon the work of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18).	The focus of discipleship is upon the Word of Christ , His teaching (John 8:31).
Salvation is God's commitment to His Word based on the work of His Son (Rom. 3:24).	Discipleship is the believer's commitment to Christ's Word based on his relationship to Christ (John 6:68).
The saved person is a saint (1 Cor. 1:2), a position shared equally by all believers.	The disciple is a student (Matt. 11:29). Some believers are better students than others.
The invitation to salvation is "Come unto Me" (John 6:37; Matthew 11:28).	The invitation to discipleship is "Come after Me" (Luke 9:23).
Salvation requires obedience to the command to believe (1 John 3:23a; John 3:36).	Discipleship requires obedience to all of Christ's commands (Matthew 28:19-20).
Salvation is the sinner hearing His Word and believing on Him (John 5:24).	Discipleship is the saint sitting at His feet and hearing His Word (Luke 10:39).

The sinner must not try to fulfill the demands of discipleship in order to be saved . This would be salvation by works.	The saint seeks to fulfill all the demands of discipleship because he is saved . This is being saved "unto good works" (Eph. 2:10).
Salvation involves a faith response to the message of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18; 15:1-4).	Discipleship involves bearing one's cross daily (Luke 9:53).
God's salvation is perfect , lacking nothing (Col. 2:10; 1 Cor. 1:30).	My measuring up to the full demands of discipleship is less than perfect , but "I follow after" (Phil. 3:12-13).
To be saved a person must believe on Christ (John 3:16; Acts 16:31). The requirement for salvation is simple faith and trust in the all-sufficient Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.	To be a true disciple a person must continue in Christ's Word, love Christ supremely, deny self, forsake all that he possesses, bear his cross daily, etc. The requirements of discipleship are many and they are difficult.
Discipleship (and all that it involves) is not a requirement for salvation.	Discipleship is the obligation of every saved person.
Every saved person is saved by faith and faith alone (not by obedience or by surrender or by submission or by love for Christ or by giving up possessions, etc.).	Every saved person is a follower of Christ because Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice...and they follow Me" (John 10:27). In this sense every saved person is a disciple (follower of Christ), and yet some sheep follow the Shepherd more closely than others.
Salvation relates primarily to justification .	Discipleship relates primarily to sanctification .
Salvation puts a person into a right relationship with Christ the Teacher.	Discipleship is an ongoing relationship and interaction between Teacher and student (a lifelong process).

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8).

In Matthew chapter 12 the Lord Jesus was under attack from His enemies. The first attack is described in Matthew 12:1-8. The Pharisees accused the Lord's disciples of breaking the Sabbath. The action of the disciples was a legitimate action (see Deut. 23:25 where God made certain benevolent provisions). A person walking through a field could pluck grain. There was nothing wrong with this according to God's law. The accusation of the Pharisees was based upon the over-scrupulous rabbinic tradition, not upon Mosaic law. The answer of Jesus is given in verses 3-8. Note that the disciples were identified with Him. Jesus assumed

responsibility for their actions and He declared them to be innocent. He gave an argument from history reminding the Pharisees of something that David once did (verses 3-4). David and his men had a need (Mark 2:25) and they asked for an exception to the law so that they could eat the showbread. The Pharisees did not condemn David for this. No Pharisee would have ever accused David of doing anything unlawful!

Christ also gave an argument from the law (verses 5-6). According to Numbers 28:9-10, the priests had certain labors to do on Sabbath days and they were not in violation of the Sabbath. Christ argued from the prophet Hosea (v. 7). He used Hosea 6:6 and His argument was like this: "You don't even understand your own Scriptures which make it clear that God is more interested in spiritual reality than ceremonial performance. It is the heart that counts!" In Matthew 12:8 Christ argues from the original purpose of the Sabbath (see the parallel passage in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath). The Sabbath was meant to be for man's benefit, but the Pharisees made it a very burdensome day by their legalistic traditions. Christ argues from the standpoint of His own superiority (v. 8). He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. This was a clear claim of deity. The Sabbath was clearly given and instituted by JEHOVAH (Gen. 2:1-3). No one but God can be rightfully called "LORD OF THE SABBATH." As God, the Lord Jesus claimed the absolute right to use the Sabbath as He wished. What blasphemy it was for mere men to accuse the "Lord of the Sabbath" of breaking the very day which He instituted in the beginning!

The Lord Is Again Accused of Breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-21).

In Matthew 12:10-21 the Lord's enemies again accused Him of breaking the Sabbath because He healed a man on that day (on Saturday, the seventh day of the week). The man who was in need of healing had a withered hand (v. 10). The attempt was made by the Pharisees to trap Him and to accuse Him of wrongdoing (v. 10). The Lord answered them (verses 11-12) and accused them of being more merciful to a dumb animal than to an afflicted human being! How this angered the Lord (see Mark 3:5)! The Lord's action in healing the man is seen in verse 13. The Lord commanded this man to do what was impossible. He was told to stretch forth his hand which he had no power to do!

Our inability + obedience to God's command = ability!

This application can be made also to salvation. Of ourselves we have no ability to save ourselves, nor are we even able to come to Christ unassisted (John 6:44,65), and yet Christ commands and we are to obey (Acts 16:31; Acts 17:30), and we are blamed if we fail to do so (John 5:40).

Observe the attitude of the Pharisees after they witnessed Jesus' healing miracle (v.14). Did they rejoice at this healing miracle? Were they glad that their fellow man had been completely restored to health? Or did they instead wish to destroy the Healer?

The Healing of the Man Who Was Blind and Dumb (Matthew 12:22-32)

In this next attack, the Lord Jesus was wrongly and wickedly accused of casting out demons by the power of the devil.

The miracle is described in Matthew 12:22. This healing involved the casting out of a demon. Apparently the demon was responsible for making the man blind and dumb. This demon possessed man was physically afflicted by the demon who indwelt him. (This does not mean that blindness and dumbness are always caused by demons.) That Satan and his demons have power to cause physical problems (only as allowed by God) is demonstrated in Job 2:7.

The people in general recognized Jesus as the Messiah ("Son of David"). Who else could have performed such an amazing miracle? (Matt. 12:23) The Pharisees reacted much differently than the general populace. They could not deny that this miracle had taken place. It really happened, and was witnessed by many, and they could not explain it away. So instead they charged the Lord with doing this miracle by the power of the devil!

It was this miracle and the Pharisees' reaction to it that gave the occasion for the Lord's statement that there was a sin which would never be forgiven (Matt. 12:31-32). This has been called the unpardonable sin. Many people have lived in great fear thinking that they have committed this sin which can never be forgiven. Therefore it is important to think through this passage very carefully.

The Unpardonable Sin

The unpardonable sin is also described as "blasphemy against the _____" (Matt. 12:31; Luke 12:10). It is a sin which will never be forgiven (Matt. 12:31-32).

Why should we study the topic? It is a vitally important topic. This sin results in damnation. Do not all sins result in damnation? Yes, but Jesus said that this sin is unforgivable. All sins can be forgiven, except this one. Jesus said that anyone who commits this sin "shall NOT be forgiven him, neither in this age, neither in the *age to come*" (Matthew 12:32). He also said that if you commit this sin you will "NEVER be forgiven" because you are "guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:29). Jesus gives a very serious warning in this passage. This is one of the most solemn warnings that Jesus ever uttered.

Another reason for studying the unpardonable sin is to help dear troubled people. Many people are worried that they have committed this sin and that forgiveness is impossible for them. These people are afraid that they have committed this sin and they believe that they have no chance of being saved. We need to have solid answers for those who think that there is no hope of ever being saved.

What is the Historical Background of This Sin?

The unpardonable sin is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10). We see the historical background of this sin in Matthew and Mark. Luke records the saying by itself, and his treatment of it is very brief. Both Matthew and Mark tell us exactly what some people were doing which led Jesus to give the warning about the blasphemy of the Spirit. Matthew gives us even more details than Mark. Let us consider Matthew's account.

First, there was a man who could not talk and could not see and was demon possessed (Matthew 12:22). He had multiple problems. Helen Keller was blind and deaf. This man was blind and dumb. He had multiple disabilities and was indwelt by a demon.

Second, the Lord Jesus healed him in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus did three things for the man. He cast the demon out, gave him the ability to see, and gave him the ability to speak (Matthew 12:22). It was a spectacular miracle.

Third, there is the response of the people to this miracle. The people were amazed and astonished (Matthew 12:23). They thought that surely this must be the Messiah. They believed that God was the explanation for this miracle. Therefore all of the people said, "Is not this the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:23). He must be the Messiah!

Fourth, there was the response of the Pharisees (Matthew 12:24) and Scribes (Mark 3:22) to this miracle. They said, "This fellow doth not cast out devils (demons), but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils (demons)" (Matthew 24:24). Beelzebub was a designation for Satan, the ruler of the demons. The Pharisees did not question that Jesus healed the man, but they questioned the source of His power. Supernatural power can only come from two sources (God or Satan). The Bible teaches that Jesus not only was filled with the Holy Spirit and performed His miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit, but it teaches that He also had the Holy Spirit **without measure** (John 3:34). The world has never known such a Spirit-empowered Man. But these religious leaders said that His power came from Satan himself and that it was really Satan who acted through Him. They had absolutely no proof of this accusation and even knew that it was false. Before their very eyes they had spectacular evidence that Jesus was everything He claimed to be, but they rejected that evidence and accused Him of being an agent of the devil.

In Matthew 12:25-30 the Lord Jesus showed these religious leaders that their accusation was totally unreasonable. Why would Satan fight against Satan? Why would Satan cast out Satan? That is, the demons worked for Satan and did his bidding. Why then would Satan cast out his own demon in the case of this blind and dumb man? Why would he expel his own agent? It would not make sense. Satan's kingdom would not stand if Satan were to fight against himself in this

manner. His kingdom would be divided (Matt. 12:26). Satan would be a fool to destroy his own kingdom.

What about the Pharisees who claimed to have cast out demons? (See Matthew 12:27) Do they do this by Beelzebub as well? (The obvious answer in the Pharisees' minds was "No!") If they do not cast out demons by Satan then it must be by the power of God. The Lord was telling them to be consistent! If you claim the power of God for "your children" (Matthew 12:27), then why do you deny it for Me, especially in the light of the unquestionable display of the power of God you have just witnessed? Let the miracles be your judges!

On the other hand, if Jesus cast out the demon by the Spirit of God (which was obviously the case), then this would prove that Jesus was everything He claimed to be. He was the King of Israel, the Messiah, the Son of God (see Matthew 12:28).

The Lord then used the illustration of the strong man (Matthew 12:29). In light of the context, the strong man is Satan. The One who binds the strong man must be stronger than he, and this would have to be Christ (compare 1 John 4:4). The house into which the stronger man enters is the body of the demon possessed man. The Lord Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, was able to forcibly deliver the man who was demon possessed. [See *The King of the Kingdom of Heaven* by Thomas Figart, pages 244-245 for a good discussion of this verse.]

How Would We Describe these Pharisees and Scribes?

How would we describe those who were guilty of the unpardonable sin? What was their spiritual condition? How receptive were they to the truth that was before their eyes? These are important questions, because if a person today think he is guilty of this sin, he would need to match the description. He would need to be as they were.

The following describes these men:

They were hard hearted; they did not have a soft heart toward the Lord.

They were guilty of stubborn unbelief; they refused to see the obvious.

They refused to acknowledge that Christ was the Messiah, the Saviour, the only hope of Israel.

They were unconvinced even by the greatest evidence; they were presented with maximum light and yet they still rejected the Lord.

They were completely closed to God's Word, even when the Lord Jesus reasoned with them logically; they were unreasonable.

They were self-righteous men, refusing to see the desperate condition of their souls; they refused to see themselves as lost men.

They were obviously Christ-rejecters; they were "against Him" (Matthew 12:30).

They were worse than the Sodomites who would have repented if the Lord Jesus had been in their midst and had performed such a miracle (Matthew 11:23-24); they were worse off than the Assyrians in Nineveh who responded to the preaching of Jonah, but the Jewish religious leaders rejected the preaching of one who was greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41)

What are the Characteristics of the Unpardonable Sin?

This sin was a verbal sin, not some great moral failure. It was not a sexual sin. The unpardonable sin was not premarital sex or adultery or homosexuality or incest. It was not a sin of violence (murder or suicide). All of those sins can be forgiven. David committed adultery and murdered a man, but he was forgiven. You can be outwardly moral, like the Pharisees and still commit this sin. The blasphemy of the Spirit involved saying some things: "Whosoever **speake**th against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him" (Matt. 12:32).

Even though the sin was verbal, the words did not necessarily need to be uttered out loud. In Matthew 12:24, what the Pharisees "**said**" was apparently not said out loud because in verse 25 we learn that "**Jesus knew their thoughts.**" How shocked they must have been to find out that the Lord knew their thoughts and condemned them for saying something which they never uttered out loud!

The problem was with something that these men said, and they did not say it just once. In Mark 3:29-30 we read, "But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation: because **they said**, He hath an unclean spirit." In verse 30 the phrase "they said" is in the imperfect tense, which indicates continuous action in the past. You could translate

it as "they were continuously saying." This is not something that they said only once or twice, but it is something that they said repeatedly. The Amplified Version says, "they persisted in saying...." "They were persistent in making this malicious charge...the tense indicates that it was not so much a single act as an attitude of heart which persisted in rejecting the light" (D. Edmond Hiebert).

This unpardonable sin involved rejection of Christ. What the Pharisees spoke indicated their unbelief and their obvious rejection of Jesus Christ. The people asked, "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:23 paraphrased) and this was their answer: "Absolutely not. This man is an instrument of Satan and performs His miracles by the power of the devil."

This rejection was extreme. It did not just involve unbelief, but it also involved blasphemy. Many people reject Christ. Most people who reject Christ do not think that He was demon possessed or that He was a tool of the devil. But the unpardonable sin was not just unbelief, it was extreme unbelief. The blasphemy of the Spirit was a very extreme form of rejection. It involved slandering the works of the Holy Spirit. They didn't slander the Person of the Holy Spirit. They didn't curse the Holy Spirit. They did not even mention His Name. They slandered the work of the Holy Spirit. They blasphemed the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29) by saying "He has an unclean spirit" (Mark 3:30). This was an insult to the Holy Spirit who empowered the Lord to perform an amazing miracle. They attributed the work of the Holy Spirit to a demon!

The unpardonable sin was a rejection by the leaders of the day. Jesus was talking to the scribes and the Pharisees. Matthew mentions the Pharisees (12:24-25). Mark mentions the scribes (3:22), scribes who came all the way down from Jerusalem. Who were the scribes? They were the professional Biblical scholars. This shows what a serious thing it is to stand in front of a group of people and publically teach or preach God's Word. That's why James says, "Be not many teachers, for you shall receive the greater condemnation (judgment)" (James 3:1). These scribes were very well educated and they came all the way from Jerusalem, sixty three miles away. It may have been a four day trip. This was an official rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the leaders. The leaders said He was empowered by Satan. They said that He was not the Messiah. Matthew 12 was a turning point in the life of Christ. It was a crucial incident in the Gospel of Matthew.

The unpardonable sin was rejection in spite of the evidence. This was a case of willful unbelief in the face of undeniable evidence. The scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus perform this miracle and it was not the first time that He had done it. He had done remarkable healing miracles many times before. This is not the case of someone who does not have enough evidence to make a decision and makes the wrong decision. These people had the evidence staring them in the face and they chose not to accept it. It was clearly a case of people who suppressed the truth. It was a rejection in the face of maximum light. This sin was without excuse.

This sin was intentional and deliberate, not accidental. This was not a casual remark made by someone who did not know any better. It was not said out of ignorance. This blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was said by people who hated Jesus and wanted to kill Him (Matthew 12:9-14). The men who said this hated Jesus. This sin involved not only unbelief but also animosity and hatred. This sin was not motivated by ignorance but by hatred and by willful unbelief.

People who have been concerned that they have committed the unpardonable sin will often share that they thought or perhaps even uttered something terrible about the Lord. Perhaps they thought something like this: "Jesus is not really the Saviour" or "The miracles of Jesus were done by Satan's power" or some other statements which should never be uttered by a believing heart. But when the person is asked if he really means this, the answer is something like this: "No, these are just thoughts that come to my mind or they are things that I might say at an impulse, but it is not what I really believe. They are unintentional. I can't even explain why my mind plays these tricks on me. I honestly believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and man's only Saviour, and I feel terrible when I think contrary thoughts that deny Him." As troubling as these things are, this is not the unpardonable sin. The people who committed the unpardonable sin spoke intentionally. Their rejection of Christ was purposeful and real. They meant what they said. Their unbelief was willful.

Consider First the Great News About Forgiveness!

Most people who study the unpardonable sin overlook one of the most glorious declarations about forgiveness of sins made anywhere in the Bible. Listen to what our Lord said, "Wherefore I say unto you, **All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men.**" Do you see the beauty in those words? What a wonderful statement. All manner of sin can be forgiven! God's grace is greater than all our sin. This doctrine of forgiveness is the crown and glory of the gospel.

Think of your own sins and how terrible they are. Think about Peter's sin of denying the Lord. Think of the sin of Saul of Tarsus who persecuted the Church and blasphemed Christ and spoke against Him and His people. Think of the sins of those who crucified Christ and how they mocked Him and reviled Him, and yet the Saviour prayed, "Father, forgive them!" Think of the thief on the cross: "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives!" Think of David's sins of adultery and murder. How great is God's forgiveness!

"If Thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130:3-4). According to Acts 10:43, those who believe in Christ receive complete remission or forgiveness of sins. All manner of sin shall be forgiven them! Read Acts 13:39 and meditate on the phrase, "all things."

God's complete forgiveness of all manner of sin is available to all who will believe.

What good news! There is hope for the most miserable, vilest sinner on earth.

However, in Matthew 12:31 we read the word “but.” There is an exception. The good news of God’s gracious forgiveness has one exception. The sin which is identified as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven (v. 31), no not ever (v. 32).

What is the Unpardonable Sin?

There is only one sin that cannot be forgiven, and that is persistent and continued rejection of Jesus Christ, God’s only Saviour. If a person continues to reject the only Person who can save Him, then how can he be saved? If person drowning in the ocean refuses to grab the lifeline, then how can he be saved? If a person is in a doomed plane and is given a parachute but refuses to use it, how can he be saved? If a sinner rejects God’s only remedy, how can he hope to be saved? There is salvation in no other Person (Acts 4:12).

What then is the connection between the sin of persistent unbelief and the sin of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?

The unpardonable sin is described as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31) or speaking against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:32). Remember, the Holy Spirit does not speak of Himself (John 16:13). His ministry is to point to Jesus Christ and to glorify Him (John 16:13). In John 16:8-11 we learn that the Spirit’s ministry is to reprove (convict and convince) the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. The Spirit of God’s ministry is to convince men that they are sinners in need of salvation. Sinners deserve God’s judgment and they need God’s righteousness. The Spirit’s ministry is to convince men that Jesus Christ is exactly whom He claimed to be.

In Matthew 12 the Spirit of God was doing a great work. He was working through the Son of God, performing an amazing healing miracle, defeating the powers of darkness and demonstrating to the Jewish people that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the King of Israel. The general populace got the message (Matt. 12:23), but the hard hearted religious leaders rejected the light they were given. Instead of receiving the Spirit’s testimony, they spoke against Him and said, “He (Jesus Christ) hath an unclean spirit” (Mark 3:29). Christ was possessed by the Spirit of God, but they accused Him of being possessed by a demon, an unclean spirit. The One who was filled with the Spirit was accused of being a tool of the devil.

Why is This Sin Unpardonable?

This sin is unpardonable because the person is unwilling to follow the path that leads to pardon. This sin cannot be forgiven because the person persistently refuses God’s way of forgiveness. If a person persistently refuses the only remedy, then it is impossible for him to be cured.

Why is Blasphemy Against the Son Forgivable, While Blasphemy Against the Spirit is Unforgivable?

The only sin that is unforgivable is not a sin against Christ but a sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:32). People can blaspheme the Lord Jesus (and call Him a liar, deceiver, Sabbath breaker or a lunatic) and still be forgiven. Remember, before Paul became a Christian he said that He was a blasphemer (I Timothy 1:12-13). Why would blasphemy against God the Son be something that **can** be forgiven, while blasphemy against God the Holy Spirit be something that **cannot** be forgiven? Why are crimes against the Son worse than crimes against the Spirit? Is the Spirit greater than the Son? Is the Son less important than the Spirit? No. They are all equal members of the Trinity. The Spirit is not greater than either the Father or the Son.

The key to understanding this involves recognizing the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Christ and to convict the world "of sin, of righteous and of judgment" (John 16:8). Blasphemy of the Spirit removes a person from the sphere in which forgiveness is even possible. The Holy Spirit's job is to bring people to Christ. A person who blasphemes the Spirit is slandering and rejecting the only One who can lead them to a place of saving faith. It is impossible to be saved if a person persists in saying "NO" to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

How Do You Know If You Have Committed This Sin?

"Those who are troubled with fears that they have sinned the unpardonable sin are the very people who have not sinned it." (J.C. Ryle)

"Those who fear they have committed this sin, give a good sign that they have not." (Matthew Henry)

Dear friend, if you come to Christ, believing in Him, you can be sure that He will receive you and will never cast you out (see John 6:37). He will receive you and you can be sure that you have not committed the unpardonable sin.

If you believe in Christ, God's love gift to this world, then you can be sure, based on God's promise, that you will never perish (John 3:16).

If you believe in Christ, then you can be sure that your sins are remitted (pardoned and forgiven) based on God's promise found in Acts 10:43, and God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

You are only in danger if you persist in your unbelief and if you continue to refuse to come to Christ. See John 5:40. Dear friend, consider God's gracious invitation to you and come to Him (read Matthew 11:28 and Isaiah 55:7).

Can This Sin be Committed Today?

The answer is both NO and YES.

NO—It cannot be exactly duplicated today. Jesus Christ is not standing in our midst today performing spectacular miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit which unmistakably confirm that He is indeed everything that He claimed to be. The setting found in Matthew chapter 12 in which this sin took place cannot be duplicated today.

YES—A person can persist in unbelief today and reject the powerful convicting ministry of God the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). Such a person will never know God's forgiveness.

Can a Christian Commit the Unpardonable Sin?

The answer to this question is clearly "NO." The only example of anyone committing this sin were the Pharisees and scribes, and they were clearly unbelievers. Jesus called them "a brood of vipers" (Matthew 12:34). He called them "evil" (12:34).

Every saved person has complete forgiveness of sins and is not in danger of eternal damnation. Consider the following:

The believer will not be damned or judged (Mark 16:16, by implication).

The believer will not perish (John 3:16).

The believer will not be condemned and will not come into judgment (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1).

The believer will never die spiritually (John 11:25-26).

The sins of a believer will never be remembered by God (Hebrews 10:17). This verse does not imply that God forgets, but it teaches that God will never bring these sins up to the believer and will never condemn him for them).

A Sober Warning

The passage on the unpardonable sin points out the danger of sinning against great light and the danger of rejecting the clear evidence that God has given to us. Has not God given us much light today? Has not God given us a completed Bible, which even the Jews in Jesus' day did not have? Do we not have the greatest evidence that Jesus is exactly whom He claimed to be, namely the sign of Jonah (His resurrection from the dead)? This was a far greater sign than the healing of the man who was blind and dumb.

A Key Question: Can a person reach a point, in this life, where it is impossible for him to be forgiven? We would all agree that when an unbeliever dies, there is no longer the possibility of forgiveness. All hope is gone. Is it possible for an unbeliever to come to a point, even before death, where there is no longer the possibility of forgiveness, where all hope of salvation is gone? Can a man say “NO” to God so often and so persistently that it becomes impossible for him to say “YES”?

It is hard to answer the above question dogmatically, but consider the following:

1. In Hebrews 3:15 we find a strong warning: “Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” The implication is that a heart can become so hard that it can no longer respond to God. Think of epoxy glue. You mix the glue with the hardener, and at first you can work with the glue because it is soft. But as time goes on the glue gets harder and harder. Finally the glue gets to the point where it is rock hard and cannot be moved at all.
2. Consider Isaiah 55:6. Does this imply that there may be a time when God cannot be found and that there may be a time when God will not be near?
3. According to Genesis 6:3 there would come a time when the Spirit would stop striving and man’s hope would be gone. Finally the door to the ark closed. The unbelievers were on the outside and they were still alive, but their hope was gone. They refused to respond to God and refused to respond to Noah’s preaching, and it was too late. The door was shut. Even if they had said, “We change our mind. Noah was right. Please open the door,” it still would have been too late.
4. Consider the case of Pharaoh. He repeatedly said “NO” to God and his heart continued to get harder and harder.
5. Consider Jeremiah 7:16; 14:11-12. Don’t waste your time praying! People can reach the point where there is no hope, where God refuses to deal with them in grace but only deals with them in judgment.
6. In Matthew 23:37-38 we see that the Jewish people were not willing to come to God in faith, in spite of all of God’s pleadings with them. There came a point where there was nothing left for God to do except judge them!
7. When unbelievers take the mark of the beast in the tribulation period, this act will seal their doom. Even though they are still alive, there will be no hope of salvation and no hope of forgiveness (see Rev. 14:9-11 and 2 Thess. 2:10-12). Taking the mark of the beast will involve not merely agreeing to be loyal to the Antichrist, but it will also involve buying a one way ticket to hell.

[In Acts 24:25 we learn that Felix trembled or was troubled due to Paul’s

preaching. He was under conviction, but apparently did not respond to the Spirit's pleadings, and there is no record that he was ever troubled again.]

Conclusion

There is no sin that renders a man beyond the reach of divine grace, except for the sin of persistent unbelief. Because of man's persistent unbelief and rejection of the truth, God may withdraw His grace from a man even before death. A person may put himself in such a state as to make it impossible for him to be saved. The man himself, and not God, is to be blamed for the hardening of his own heart and for his refusal to respond to God's Word and to the pleadings of the Spirit.

God knows the hearts of men and we do not. From our point of view, we never know when a person has reached this point. We know that if a person believes in Christ he will have complete forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43), and thus we will urge men to do so until their last dying breath. For us to declare that a person is incapable of being saved is utter presumption. In fact, often the people we think will never get saved are the very ones that do so!

Note: I am indebted to Alan Lewis, of Elon, NC for his excellent study on the significance of the unpardonable sin. Many of his insights have been incorporated into the above study with his permission. –George Zeller

An Evil Heart Brings Forth Evil Words (Matthew 12:33-37)

The heart is the root; what comes out of the mouth is the fruit (Matt. 12:35). If you hear filthy garbage coming out of someone's mouth, you can remind the person that his heart is showing (Matt. 12:34).

The words which are expressed reflect the inner condition of the human heart. The tongue is the ideal indicator of man's spiritual state: "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2). Words are considered a part of the "works" which are the basis of the judgment for the unsaved (Rev. 20:11-15). In the day of judgment man will give account of every idle word (Matt. 12:36). The word "idle" here has a literal meaning of "non-working". "It has no legitimate work, no office, no business, but is morally useless and unprofitable" (*Vincent's Word Studies*, p. 47). God will carefully review all idle words to demonstrate to man the condition of his heart (see Matt. 12:35). The words give evidence of the true spiritual state of an individual. "Careless words of the wicked will be evidence of their character, and by them they shall be condemned" (Thomas Figart, and see Matt. 12:37). "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant" (Luke 19:22). In application, the believer's speech should bear witness to his new life in Christ (Col. 4:6).

The Sign of the Prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:38-42)

The scribes and Pharisees asked for a sign! This is remarkable in light of the signs the Lord had already given them (see verses 13, 22, etc.). They were saying, "Prove to us that you are the Messiah." But the Lord had already proved it again and again. In their unbelief they had closed their eyes to the clear evidence that had been presented to them. So the Lord will give them one more sign: the "Jonah sign," which was the sign of the resurrection.

Consider Matthew 12:41-42. Jonah, who was a "lesser than Christ" preached and people repented, but when Christ Himself came (the "greater preacher") people did not repent. Woe unto them! They listened to the greatest preacher the world has ever known, the Son of God Himself, and they refused to respond to His message in the right way! They were without excuse!

Notes for Further Study

Matthew 11:12. This is a difficult verse. John pointed to Christ and people were excited and responding. They were striving to enter into the kingdom. A simple example of this is found in John chapter 6. The Lord healed the people (verse 2) and the Lord fed the people (verses 5-14). Notice the result. In verse 15 they wanted to come and take Him **by force** and make him a king! They wanted to nominate Him and vote for Him right on the spot! Any person that can provide perfect health and feed us every day is our perfect candidate for king! And yet they missed the whole point. Christ came to heal the heart, not the body. Christ came to feed the soul, not the stomach. They wanted the kingdom and they wanted it badly. However, they wanted it on their terms, and in their way, not on God's terms and not in God's way.

Matthew 11:20. Both the King and His forerunner gave Israel the message of repentance (Matthew 4:17 and 3:2). Did they do Israel? No, "they repented not" (verse 20).

Matthew 11:22,24. The Sodomites were unsaved and went to Hades (and ultimately will be in the lake of fire). The people of Capernaum, for the most part, were unsaved and also went to Hades (and ultimately will be in the lake of fire). The phrase "it will be more tolerable" indicates that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. Some people in hell will be worse off than others. The justice of God demands this. Think of a morally upright man who was a good father and good husband and good citizen of his country (and may have even given his life for his country on the battlefield). Without Christ this good man is unsaved and will suffer eternal punishment, but he will not be punished as severely as Hitler who murdered millions.

Matthew 12:40. Between His death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus was in the "heart of the earth." The term "heart" means "center." It is not speaking of our

Lord's burial which took place on the surface of the earth, rather than in the heart of the earth. From other passages we learn that the Lord went to Hades. See Acts 2:31 where we learn that during this time Christ was in hell (Greek: *Hades*). The place where the Lord went is also described as "paradise" (Luke 23:43). See our paper entitled, "Where Do the Dead Go?"

Matthew 12:43-45. The figure in Matthew 12:44 is that of a house which is "empty, swept, and garnished," that is, prepared for occupancy. Israel was made ready for the coming of the Saviour through the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist. When Christ did come Israel should have received Him and welcomed Him as the promised One sent by God. Instead they utterly rejected Him (Matthew chapters 11-12) and refused to receive Him (John 1:11). To reject truth can only leave the door open for error. Their final state of rejection would only be disastrous.

Matthew 12:46-50. Who is really close to the Lord Jesus? Who is really closely related to Him? Not his physical mother and brothers necessarily (though they can be close to Him as well). The issue is made clear in Matthew 12:50. In the parallel passage we read "he who hears the word of God and keeps it" (Luke 8:21) which gives us insight into what it means to do the will of God. The will of God is vitally connected to the Word of God. God's Word is God's chosen method for making known His will. Those who think they are doing God's will and yet are living contrary to God's Word, are sadly deceived.