

Matthew 12:31-32

What is the unpardonable sin? Does it coincide with Heb. 6 and 1 Jn. 5:16?

Near Context:

The primary hermeneutical tool that unlocks the understanding of this misunderstood text is immediate context. The opening word of v31 “therefore” ties this text into the previous narrative. Jesus has constantly confronted the Pharisees in their false religious system. Earlier in chapter 12 Jesus attests His Lordship over the religious system (v8, 12). He performed miraculous signs (v13, 15) and claimed that these deeds were empowered by God’s Spirit (v18). As the crowds were amazed at Jesus’ and nearly convinced of His Messiahship (v22), the Pharisees felt compelled to accuse Christ of demonic power (v24) lest they lose their following to this “Son of Man” whom they detested.

Study of the context of verses 31-32 shows that both are parallel in their subject matter. Donald Hagner explains the parallelism by dividing the v31 into 2 sections: 1. Forgiveness of sin and blasphemy and 2. No forgiveness for blasphemy of the Spirit. At the same time, v32 divides into two sections: 1. Forgiveness for those who speak against the Son of Man and 2. No forgiveness for those who speak against the Holy Spirit (Donald A. Hagner, “Matthew,” Word Biblical Commentary, 33, 346). In both verses the same main verb is used in the same form “it will be forgiven.”

Wide Context:

The Eternal Word had become flesh (Jn. 1) and existed as “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Since Jesus’ glory was veiled in the flesh (Phil. 2:7-8) and people would not necessarily see Him as God, His works attested to His message being from God. According to His own testimony, He performed miracles and cast out demons by the Spirit of God, which attested to His majesty (Matt. 12:28). His works could not be denied, as they were empowered by the Spirit. Thus, to deny Christ’s works, was to deny all that He had to offer. The miracles that Jesus did produced amazement to the extent that people concluded that He was the Son of David, but the Pharisees refused to accept His divine origin (Matt. 12:22-24). Blasphemy of the Spirit was a culmination of final rejection of God’s plan of salvation through Christ, as observed in His works empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Word Study:

Blaspheme, in its various forms, appears 59 times in the NT. It generally means “to speak irreverently of.” . Obviously Peter did that when He denied the Lord, yet he was restored (Jn. 21:15-17). How could Saul of Tarsus, the esteemed persecutor of the Way, be pardoned (1 Tim. 1:12-17)? Hendriksen is helpful by pointing out that “these words by no stretch of the imagination imply that for certain sins there will be forgiveness in the life hereafter (William Hendriksen, “Matthew,” New Testament Commentary, 528). The Pharisees would not be receptive, they would not be humble, and they would not repent of their sin and religion. With no acceptance of the Holy Spirit’s work of repentance, they would forever face the judgment for their sin.

The question remains: Can a person blaspheme the Holy Spirit today? The answer is no, since we people are not observing Jesus’ Spirit-empowered miracles today.

However, there is the possibility of not being pardoned for sin. Each person will give an account of their response to Jesus' invitation to salvation. To say it another way, the only unforgivable sin is when a person deliberately rejects Jesus' call to salvation. His invitation is "come unto Me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." This such warning is what is taught in such warning passages as Hebrews and 1 John 5:16.