

Will God Forgive Me?

Intro: I don't often get an opportunity to share with you some of the opportunities that come to me to teach through e-mail. Recently I received the following letter from a person who visited the church's web site.

Dear Mr. Felker,

My name is ____, and I'm seeking to correspond with someone who has experience in Christian counseling. I came across your congregation's website by reading an article you had written on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Years ago I went through some difficult times and could not make sense of them. I concluded that God was not with me, and I became angry at Him. I truly let Him have it with both barrels (basically, I swore at Him in a fit of anger and left the faith). I've since repented of my fit of rebellion. Still, I remain burdened with unending guilt. Does God forgive me or not? Your article points out that Jesus drew a distinction between blaspheming the Son of Man, which is forgivable, and blaspheming the Spirit, which is an eternal sin. Jesus, however, never mentioned anything about blaspheming God the Father. In my mind, blaspheming God must be the pinnacle of all sins. I've prayed to God about all of this, and I've found articles saying that God forgives me. At the same time, I've found other articles that say I'm condemned. Who is correct? I've struggled with this for a long time. I'm wondering if I'm the only one in this position. I'm not looking for soothsaying, only truth. Have you ever known anyone to hurl anger and obscenities at God, or am I simply exceptionally brazen?

If first impressions mean anything, this letter will certainly paint me in a poor light... I'd appreciate any insight you're willing to offer.

What would you say to a person like this man?

The unpardonable sin

Many people struggle with the guilt of past statements against God and conclude that forgiveness is not available to them. Their conclusions are based in part on the warning of Jesus to the Pharisees in Mk. 3.

"Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— (Mark 3:28-29)

Did Jesus here mean to suggest that there was a sin of such great magnitude that it was inherently unforgivable? If so, what is that sin and how does one know it has been committed?

The sin of which Jesus speaks is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It appears that the scribes and Pharisees had committed this sin in the statements they made about Jesus and the source of His miracles.

They observed that Jesus was performing manifest miracles. These

they could not deny; so their only course was either to believe in Him as a prophet of God or to attribute His miracles to the devil. They chose the latter option. They made a deliberate decision about Jesus and His miracles that reflected a hardened heart and a determination not to believe in Him. Thus, their attitude resulted in the abhorrent insult paid to the Holy Spirit, namely, that He was an unclean spirit. They followed up on their sinful attitude by not only crucifying Jesus but refusing to repent even when evidence of His resurrection was given to them. They had reached a point of no return!

I submit that the reason why blasphemy against the Spirit was called “unpardonable” is not because it is so much worse than other sins such that no forgiveness is possible for it, but because it reflects a hardness of heart that puts one beyond the possibility of repentance. The Bible clearly teaches that one may become so hardened that he can reach a point of no return! For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

I’m not suggesting that the people the Hebrew writer describes had committed blasphemy against the Spirit. I’m only suggesting that one can reach a point of no return beyond the scope of repentance. And it appears to me that it is for this reason that Jesus declares blasphemy against the Spirit unforgivable!

God’s response to an angry child

All of us may have at one time or another in our lives had feelings of anger, frustration, and confusion toward God. Often we experience these things because we cannot at the moment reconcile what we see in our lives with the faith we have affirmed in God. This is a problem that all Christians confront to some degree depending upon the heaviness of the burdens we have been called upon to bear.

I thought of Job and his wife and the great burdens that came upon them and the obvious difficulty they had in reconciling their views about God with their current experience.

Job's wife succumbed to the frustration, confusion, and doubt urging her husband to "curse God and die" (Job 1:9).

Even Job, who did not sin in the face of the difficulties, responded to his friends with not only charges of his innocence, but with statements that appear to indict God's rule of the world.

Yet in spite of these things, God did not give up on them but made known to them His glory so that they could find their way through the doubt and confusion they had experienced. In addition, he restored to them all that had been lost, an evidence of His forgiveness of their rash statements.

Is there any indication about how God may respond to an angry child?

Though it is important not to overreach with this comparison, it is helpful to remember that God is our heavenly Father and we may have some sense of His attitude toward us as we consider our own treatment of our children. Jesus suggested this idea in Lk. 11.

“Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? “Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:11-13)

The question Jesus raises is simply this: Would we expect that God would deal with His children with less love than human beings deal with their own children?

In a fit of rage a child may often, not understanding the wisdom of his father, shout out improper things like "I hate you!" Though a father may be displeased to hear such things and may even discipline a child for saying them, he does not reject or disown the child; but understands the anger and frustration being expressed is the result of an inadequate understanding of His love and wisdom. He knows that with time such attitudes will be replaced by appreciation for his loving discipline and provision.

In the same way it seems to me, God may at times hear from us things that are irreverent and wrong; but this does not cause Him to reject forever those who say such things. Instead he patiently hopes for the repentance of the wayward child and the beginning of a new relationship with Him that is based on love and a new realization of what we can have with Him (Lk. 15:11-32).

Who among us has not been moved by the loving compassion of the father of the prodigal son who yearned for the return of a rebellious son and who has not been touched by the acceptance and forgiveness illustrated in this wonderful parable? The parable of the prodigal son is not about the son! It's about the Father! It's about a love that will not give up on a child until the heart is so hard that there are no longer any thoughts of home or return to God.

An application

To our questioner

In what category would we put our website visitor? Would you call him a hardened criminal who had gone past the point of redemption? Or would you call him an angry child who cannot reconcile his faith with God's actions? It seems to me that he is the latter. Did he reach the point of no return? It seems to me that his penitent spirit indicates that he did not do so; even now he continues to feel the regret of his harsh words against God.

But did His words against God remove Him forever from God's forgiveness? Not any more so, than my children's angry words would cause me to disown them.

Thus, to him I offered my words of assurance that forgiveness is always possible for those who return to God.

To all of us

All of us will go through times when life is confusing and doubts overcome us. We may say harsh and rash things about God and against Him. Such things are wrong and must be repented of; but we can thank God that even so, He was willing to forgive "the chief of sinners" when he had a heart to repent!

Recently I spoke with you about what were some of the final words Paul wrote before his execution by Nero. There he sat in the harsh conditions of the Maritime dungeon. I could easily imagine that he could have said, "I've served God all my life. I've gone through the fire for him, beatings, shipwrecks, stripes time and time again and it has all come to this?"

But instead Paul had developed a trust in God through his trials that caused him instead to overcome bitterness and express even greater confidence in God in spite of his circumstances (2 Tim. 1:12).

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (2 Timothy 1:12)

Throughout life we must like Paul learn not to let life's disappointments lead us to confusion, doubt, despair, and even rebellion. Instead we must learn to make each test lead us to a new level of faith and to keep trusting him no matter what! I remember the words of Job:

"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. (Job 13:15)

Conclusion: Through the years I've observed that most people who leave the Lord are not so much under the lure of some fleshly sin as they are disappointed with God. In some way they felt He had let them down and they decided they would just turn away.

If you have had your moment of anger with God, I hope that you too will not allow it to cause you to deny His love and forgiveness. The cross is His answer to all our questions, doubts, and frustrations. This is how much he loved us.

And his eyes still scan the horizon for that lost boy who needs to come back home. Is it you?