

Unforgivable?

Scripture: Matthew 12:31; Revelation 14:9–11

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Several years ago in a live Q&A session, someone asked John MacArthur if taking the mark of the Beast during the Great Tribulation would be an unpardonable sin. His answer, in short, was no. Though there is a stern warning against taking the mark of the Beast in Revelation 14, the sin is not categorically said to be *unpardonable*. (That would contradict Matthew 12:31.) The point of the severe language in Revelation 14 is to make clear what an utterly reprehensible sin it will be to swear an oath of willful loyalty to Antichrist.

Someone posted John MacArthur's reply to that question on YouTube with a melodramatic one-word title in all caps: "OUTRAGE." Gossip-mongers on the Internet got hold of it, apparently, and within days someone wrote to our ministry saying, "I saw pastor John on a YouTube video saying the way to be saved in the Tribulation is to take the mark of the Beast."

Well—no.

If someone listens to Pastor MacArthur's reply and imagines he was saying it's no great sin to receive the mark of the Beast, listen again; that grossly twists what he actually said. The question is not (as one writer suggests) "How Far Can You Go and Still Be Able to Repent?" The point John MacArthur was making is about the extremes to which God's grace will reach in order to seek and save a sinner.

Yes, Revelation 14:9–11 says, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name." Clearly, receiving the mark is a sin that will send those who commit it to hell.

But the Bible also says, "Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). In short, *all* sin carries the threat of eternal doom, and some particularly heinous sins have a built-in hardening effect that makes them particularly dangerous. Scripture occasionally singles out common sins that have this peculiarly soul-destroying effect.

On the other hand, only *one very specific sin* is ever said to be unforgivable. *Any* sin that is repented of is forgivable. Immediately after declaring all fornicators, drunkards, and swindlers unfit for heaven, the apostle writes, "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). After saying, "Whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in

heaven,” Jesus famously forgave Peter, who denied Him before men.

Jesus Himself said, “*Any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people*, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven ” (Matthew 12:31, emphasis added). The one unpardonable sin was the sin of those who had seen His miracles with their own eyes; they knew He was the true Messiah; they were part of the generation to whom He was personally sent. And yet they attributed His powers to Satan. That was unforgivable because it was such a hard-hearted, willful expression of utter rejection from fully enlightened hearts, who punctuated their rejection with an extreme blasphemy. Those Pharisees had stood in the presence of the living embodiment of all truth; they heard His words and saw His works. All the mysteries of Christ had been unveiled before their very eyes. And yet they spurned Him. There was nothing else that could be shown to them to enlighten them further. They were not deceived; they knew full well what they were doing. That’s why their sin was unpardonable (cf. 1 Timothy 1:13).

Revelation 19:20 indicates that multitudes will take the mark of the Beast because they are *deceived*. Scripture does not say that they are thereby automatically hardened forever against repentance. That is not the point of the strong warnings.

This whole issue suddenly became a matter of intense controversy when it was mentioned on a provocative radio program. It’s certainly not worth all the ink that has been wasted and all the bandwidth that has been consumed by angry people demanding explanations and retractions. This much should certainly be clear from the biblical text (and I think would be affirmed by all sides): Taking the mark of the Beast is high treason against Christ and will be judged by God accordingly. Meanwhile, the Lord is “good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon [Him]” (Psalm 86:5).

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