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WHAT IS THE UNPARDONABLE SIN?

by Clay Jones

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The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is called the “unpardonable sin,” a sin that will never be forgiven. The very possibility of even committing it often haunts many Christians. Indeed, as an insecure high school sophomore I once thought that I had committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit—and I became depressed. Clearly, our own mood and emotional outlook can affect how we listen to Scripture. In the four decades since, I’ve encountered many Christians who feared that they had committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and I’ve always been glad to tell them that they had not.

Jesus’ teaching on the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit—the unpardonable sin—is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but in Matthew we find Jesus’ most thorough and cohesive presentation. In Matthew 12:22 we read that Jesus healed a demon possessed man who was blind and mute. We won’t completely understand the significance of what follows unless we understand the wonder of this moment in first-century Palestine. A blind and mute person was a burden and a blight—someone dirty, someone to avoid—and this one was demon possessed.

But Jesus healed him! Suddenly the man was able to speak and see. In a moment he was able-bodied. He could care for himself and express what was on his mind. The people were “astonished.” What a wonderful thing! What an amazing joy and relief this must have been to those who cared for him.

But in response to this wholesome, restorative, and undeniable miracle—undeniable even to the Pharisees—the Pharisees sneered, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons.”¹ So the Pharisees attribute this miraculous healing to Satan—the “lord of the flies,” the “Prince of Darkness,” the “evil one.” The Pharisees’ response demonstrates an unequivocal hardness against God.

In refutation, Jesus stresses the obvious in verse 26: “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?” Such schizophrenic behavior would incapacitate Satan’s kingdom. But then Jesus kicks it up by pointing out that no one plunders a strong man’s house without first binding the strong man, and so Jesus demonstrates that he must be casting out demons by an “authority greater than Satan.”² In short, Jesus’ easy conquest of powerful evil beings demonstrates what only hardheartedness would refuse to see: Jesus healed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And now we come to one of the Bible’s most sobering statements: “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (v. 31–32).

At the outset, it is important to note that the Pharisees didn’t mention or “speak” the words “Holy Spirit” or anything even close. It must therefore be possible to commit the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit without ever even uttering the words “Spirit” or “Holy Spirit.” What then did the Pharisees do? Notice the context. They attributed the undeniable, unambiguous, healing work of the Holy Spirit—in this case He freed a man from being ravaged by a demon that resulted in the man’s being blind and mute—to the power of Satan. This wasn’t just a misunderstanding. New Testament professor D. A. Carson is right to say that the Pharisees’ blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the rejection of the “truth in full

awareness that that is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Spirit even though there can be no other explanation of Jesus' exorcisms than that. For such a sin there is no forgiveness."³

Then, in verses 33–34, Jesus further illumines the Pharisees' hardened condition. Jesus tells them that a "tree is known by its fruit" and that they are a "brood of vipers" who are "evil" and who speak out of the "abundance of the heart." In other words, the Pharisees' blasphemy wasn't a hastily uttered slip of the tongue or simply a mistaken apprehension of reality. Rather, it was a knowing, deliberate, and final rejection for which they will give an account of themselves on the Day of Judgment.

Those tenderhearted toward God would panic after hearing Jesus' logic, rebuke, and warning of eternal condemnation. But not the Pharisees. Instead, in v. 38 we read, "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.'" It was as if they said, "Even though you have healed a blind and mute man in our presence, demonstrated your dominance over spiritual beings, and have refuted our arguments—we still need more proof that what you do is of God." In verse 39, Jesus tells them that this request further demonstrates their hardened wickedness: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign."

Thus the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is more than a onetime, or perhaps even a frequent, rejection, whether verbal or not, of the Holy Spirit's testimony to Jesus.

Consider two examples in Scripture of people who initially rejected the Spirit's testimony to Christ, but later accepted it. Jesus' brother James grew up with Jesus, was present during the inauguration of Jesus' miracle working ministry (John 2:11–12), and was probably present at this miracle (Matt. 12:46), but James thought that Jesus was, at the least, confused or mentally unstable (John 7:3–5). Later, however, James became a leader of the Christian church (Gal. 1:19). Likewise, Paul not only initially rejected the gospel of Christ, he sought to imprison and kill those who actively proclaimed it (Acts 8:1; 9:1). Later, however, Paul became an apostle. Therefore, it is clear the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit isn't simply failing to acknowledge the Spirit's testimony to Christ. Rather, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit occurs when one knowingly, unambiguously, intentionally, and permanently rejects the Holy Spirit's testimony to Jesus. New Testament professor Darrell L. Bock sums it up well: "The blasphemy of the Spirit might be regarded as the by-product of rejecting the Son of Man. The difference between blaspheming the Son of Man and blaspheming the Spirit is that blasphemy of the Son of Man is an instant rejection, while blasphemy of the Spirit is a permanent rejection....Once the Spirit's testimony about God's work through Jesus is permanently refused, then nothing can be forgiven, since God's plan has been rejected."⁴

Like Jesus, therefore, we must warn those who harden themselves against the proclamation of the Good News. For this blasphemy adamantly, intently, and with finality rejects the Holy Spirit's work, and therefore it puts one beyond repentance.

Furthermore, consider a rationale for why the unpardonable sin is what it is. Christians don't believe that the Father and Son are to be *less revered* than the Holy Spirit. What makes sense then of why the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is unforgivable is that it is the ultimate hardening of oneself against the Holy Spirit whose very work is to convict the world of sin and the truth about Jesus (John 16:7–9).

It can be easy for Christians struggling with rampant but unfocused insecurities to blame their anxieties on something tangible such as, "Maybe I've committed the unpardonable sin!" But we must subdue such anxieties by taking every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5) and rooting our lives in the knowledge of the clear teaching of Scripture. For no one who has fixedly refused the work of the Holy Spirit would be worried that he or she might have offended the Holy Spirit. The very fact that a person would be concerned about his or her relationship with Jesus is evidence that he or she isn't hardened against the Holy Spirit!

Moreover, if the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit could occur through nothing more than ignorant or angry words spoken in haste than Scripture would be self-contradictory. This is so because there are many verses that unmistakably guarantee a person's salvation that would not be true if he or she had committed an unpardonable sin (John 5:24; cf. John 1:12; John 3:16; Rom. 10:9). These verses don't say, "You will be saved unless you've committed the unpardonable sin." They just say, "You will be saved."

A sure knowledge of what Jesus says about us dispels unfounded insecurities. Indeed, this is what was most helpful to me as an insecure high school sophomore. I memorized Scripture verses like those mentioned above and whenever I feared that I had committed the unpardonable sin I persistently recited them to myself in a loop until I regained assurance of my salvation. Romans 10:9 says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Therefore, those who confess “Jesus is Lord” and believe that “God raised him from the dead” can safely and assuredly conclude that they have not committed the unpardonable sin, but will be saved.

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NOTES

- 1 All Scripture quotations are from the ESV.
- 2 D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 290.
- 3 Carson, 291–92.
- 4 Bock, 1143. The “blasphemy of the Spirit is not so much an act of rejection as it is a persistent and decisive rejection of the Spirit’s message and work concerning Jesus. When a person obstinately rejects and fixedly refuses that message or evidence, that person is not forgiven” (Bock, 1141).