

What Is Blasphemy Of The Holy Spirit?

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“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” —Matthew 12:31

In Isaiah 55:8-9, God says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” The Bible provides a consistent record of this fact, but from the Book’s beginning to its end, we see mankind at odds with his Creator. No matter the topic, human beings have developed a contrary viewpoint—and the confidence that they are right.

Perhaps no other group of people epitomizes this contrariness as do the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, on whom He pronounces “woe” *eight times* in one chapter (Matthew 23)! As bad as that was, though, Jesus had an earlier interaction with the Pharisees that caused the Son of God to utter some of the most sobering words in the entire Bible. In Matthew 12:31-32, He warns about crossing a line that cannot be uncrossed:

Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.

This transgression is commonly called “the unpardonable sin,” something so grave that it will not be forgiven, either in the present age or in the next one, even though God is normally eager to forgive. We may not be in immediate danger of committing this sin, yet the lesson contains principles that can always be applied.

Understanding Blasphemy

Blasphemy is not talked about much these days, since our culture cares little about the things of God. The word “blasphemy” comes from two roots that together mean “injurious speaking.” Granted, speaking (or writing) that causes injury is quite common these days, but blasphemy belongs in a separate category because it has God or something sacred as its target. Thus, *blasphemy* is “a dishonoring of God or sacred things,” whether done deliberately or not.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 12 are a strong enough warning by themselves, but the parallel account in Mark 3:29 makes the consequences of this even more plain: “He who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit *never* has forgiveness, but is subject to *eternal condemnation*” (emphasis added).

The wider context of these verses helps us to understand this stark warning, beginning in Matthew 12: 22 with Christ healing a demon-possessed blind-mute. Because of the Pharisees’ hard hearts, they would not accept that this had been done through the power of the Holy Spirit, so they tried to diminish this work of God by claiming it was performed by the power of Satan.

While Christ's teaching on this occasion continues all the way to verse 45, for our purposes, we will summarize only through verse 37. In verse 33, He says to evaluate based on the fruit that is produced. The Pharisees should have been able to see the supremely positive fruit that He was producing, and at the same time, He was pointing out that the fruit they were producing was rotten. In verses 34-35, their speaking evil against the power of God reflected the evil in their own hearts. While the Pharisees belittled the miracle that had just taken place, Jesus says in verse 36 that even idle or careless words must be accounted for in the Day of Judgment. Verse 37 warns that our words will either justify us or condemn us, putting the Pharisees on thin ice.

Notice, though, that He does not state directly that these Pharisees had committed the unpardonable sin. They *did* commit blasphemy serious enough to evoke a thunderous warning, but it appears that Jesus may have made some allowance for the Pharisees because, in His taking on the form of a bondservant (Philippians 2:7), they were confused about who He was. His true identity as the Son of God had not been revealed to them (as it had been to the disciples; Matthew 16:16-17), so He declared that they could be forgiven the blasphemous things they said about Him. He did not mean that blasphemy or other sins are no big deal, but rather that it is possible for those things to be forgiven upon repentance, in contrast to a transgression that cannot be forgiven at all.

Remember, the Pharisees triggered this warning by attributing the outworking of God to the Lord of Flies (Beelzebub). It included a rejection of God's nature, power, and activity. The conversation between Christ and Nicodemus shows that some of the Pharisees would acknowledge that Jesus was a Teacher sent by God (John 3:1-2). Yet, Matthew 12:14 states that these Pharisees were plotting against Him, so they had malicious intent.

Even so, a measure of ignorance remained. Paul says in I Corinthians 2:8 that if the rulers of the age—which would include the Pharisees—had full comprehension, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. Despite their attitudes approaching the point where they would be unable to repent, their lack of full comprehension of who they were opposing meant that repentance could still be possible once their eyes are opened. Due to their ignorance, they were not guilty of conscious rejection of the Spirit of the Most High God.

Qualifying the Unpardonable Sin

If this were all we had, we might conclude that all it takes is a slip of the tongue, and we are metaphorical toast. But the book of Hebrews provides further instruction:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

This shows that the unpardonable sin is not easily committed. Notice the qualifications: A person must have had spiritual enlightenment. He must have tasted the heavenly gift, which could refer to God's forgiveness or the overall grace that comes from a relationship with God. He must have

actually received God's Spirit and experienced the goodness of God's Word and God's gifting. Finally, he must have genuinely repented.

These attributes are all part of the same spiritual condition: being "in Christ." John 15:6 describes this same condition—and the results of falling from it: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

If such a person—who is abiding in Christ—falls away, J.B. Phillips' paraphrase reads, ". . . it proves impossible to make them repent as they did at first. For they are re-crucifying the Son of God . . . and by their conduct exposing [H]im to shame and contempt."

What does it mean to "fall away"? The word in Hebrews 6:6 is not the normal Greek word for "apostasy." It is used only in this place, so it cannot be compared with other usages. Greek lexicons indicate it means "to become lost; to fall; to turn aside; to be at fault; to forsake; or to go astray." One says it means "to abandon a former relationship or association."

We can grasp what "falling away" means in general, but we do not have specifics, such as degree and duration. Each of us has "turned aside" or "gone astray" at points, yet it has been possible for us to repent. The Bible provides the example of King David and others who, at times, seemed to give more evidence of spiritual death than spiritual life. Perhaps we know someone who took a long detour in his or her Christian life that certainly appeared to be "falling away," but God brought him or her to repentance.

Clearly, some ambiguity exists here, a hopeful thing, as it indicates that God retains to Himself the judgment of where the line is. We do not need the specifics to understand the principle.

Sinning Willfully

The author of Hebrews gives us another clue a few chapters later:

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26-29)

The key phrase here is "sin willfully." The author is describing an overall mindset rather than a single action. Many times when we sin, we have a willingness to sin because we give in out of weakness and do what we know is wrong. But *willful* sin occurs when a person expresses deliberate and sustained opposition to God and His law, and his heart has hardened enough that he defiantly refuses to repent. In this regard, the unpardonable sin is not a specific sin. Rather, it could be *any* sin that is committed with a heart that is against God and that refuses to soften.

The Bible shows a number of sins against the Holy Spirit that still fall short of willful blasphemy. Ephesians 4:20 speaks of "grieving" the Holy Spirit. Acts 7:51 mentions "resisting" the Holy Spirit. I Thessalonians 5:19 warns against "quenching" the Spirit. All of these show some opposition to the outworking, the power, and the fundamental nature of God.

But blaspheming the Holy Spirit ratchets up this opposition to the point that the things of God are deliberately despised and denigrated after receiving knowledge of the truth. It has the effect of trampling the very Creator underfoot and belittling the holy covenant of which He is the Mediator. Repentance is impossible because self-confidence (as opposed to faith in God) has hardened into an arrogant and insolent refusal to recognize God's preeminence. The rejection of God becomes so complete that the very idea of repentance becomes ludicrous. By rejecting the Spirit of grace and the forgiveness it allows, the blasphemer has nothing with which to pay for his sins, except his own life.

It has been observed that this condition can come about in a couple of ways:

One is through deliberate choice. In this regard, among the biggest dangers to our walk with God is resentment and bitterness because these emotions can poison the mind to such a degree that we can simply stop caring about God and His way. The object or circumstance of resentment begins to take up more of our view—more of our thoughts—than God Himself, and our inclination toward His will becomes overthrown in the internal rage.

A second way is through spiritual neglect, the path these Hebrews were treading. Through neglect, God's truth slips away over time, and the things of Satan's world begin to fill the void. The result is such spiritual weakness that what truly matters is no longer a part of the reasoning process. God's law becomes unimportant, and Christ's sacrifice becomes irrelevant, like distant memories with no immediate value.

Condemning the Brethren

Even if we are nowhere near this condition, we need to consider another aspect of these principles. Recall that what evoked Christ's ominous warning was the Pharisees' attribution of God's work, by His Spirit, to an unclean (demonic) source. In principle, we may be guilty of something similar if we are so set in our opinions that we are unwilling to acknowledge the activity of God in His other children.

The scattering of the church seems to have encouraged a change in perception from the one extreme of believing that everyone associated with the church is converted to the other extreme of suspecting that everyone who is not just like us must be unconverted. Truly, there is a fine line here, since we are required to evaluate fruit and discern what is of God and what is not. With all of the scriptural warnings about false teaching, teachers, and even brethren, we understand the necessity to compare words and deeds with the Word of God and to reject what is not of Him. We dare not underestimate the risk of deception.

On the other hand, though, another grave danger lurks in concluding that someone is unconverted because of some failing we observe in him or her. It may be that we are correct in our judgment, and our words will justify rather than condemn us. Yet, consider for a moment what is at stake if we speak idle words and misjudge this matter: It means we are attributing the work of God in that person's life—the faith, the overcoming, any good fruit—to something other than God. We may not be able to see all that He has done, but we are deciding it is nothing!

Can we grasp what transpires when we do such a thing? We are casting aspersions on the priceless Sacrifice substituted for that person. We are declaring the holy covenant that God made with that

person to be null and void. We are insulting the Spirit of grace in that person's life. Is it really worth risking that sort of evil speaking against something that is sacred?—against a beloved child of the Most High God?

Consider Paul's early experience with the church (see Acts 9). He did horrible things to holy people, and he did it with a clear conscience because he was sure he was right. He thought he was serving God by opposing the heretics—until that same God knocked him flat and told him that he was persecuting his own Maker. Decades after the fact, he was still lamenting his violence and contrariness toward people in whom the Holy Spirit dwelled. So terrible were his actions in his own sight that he did not even consider himself worthy to be called an apostle (I Corinthians 15:9). What he did was similar to what the Pharisees did in Matthew 12—he misjudged the activity of the Holy Spirit. But he also acted in ignorance, so he repented when God allowed him to see.

As Isaiah 58 says, God's thoughts are so much higher than ours. It is when we start thinking too highly of our own thoughts that we begin grieving, resisting, or even quenching the Spirit of God. God gives us these strong warnings because it is possible for us to ascend above the heights of the clouds in our own thoughts, and to arrive at the point where the mind, power, and nature of God become unrecognizable and objects of scorn. Jesus' warning should prompt us to evaluate our actions and words to ensure that we are not in any way opposing the Spirit of God.