

St Matthew 12:31-32

The Unforgiven Sin

In these verses Jesus continues His accusation of the Pharisees with a discussion of the 'unpardonable sin.' The warning is repeated twice for emphasis: "blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men... whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him." So the Pharisees are justly accused of blasphemy. Later they will falsely accuse Jesus of the same, and condemn Him to death for it. The text can be outlined as follows:

12:31 **Wherefore I say unto you:**

All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men:

but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.

12:32 **And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him:**

but whosoever speaks against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

What is the Unforgiven Sin?

Jesus speaks of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. [See also Mark 3:28-30 and Luke 12:10] We begin, then, with a discussion of blasphemy. Jesus first speaks of blasphemy, second of "speaking against." What is blasphemy? The Christian Cyclopaedia offers this definition:

Speech, thought, writing, or action manifesting irreverence toward God or anything sacred (*Psalm 74:10, 18; Isaiah 52:5; Revelation 16:9, 11, 21*). Expressions of contempt for destiny or deity are commonplace in primitive religion. False charges of blasphemy brought against Jesus (*Matthew 26:64-66; John 10:33*), Stephen (*Acts 6:11*). Saul compelled Christians to blaspheme (*Acts 26:11*). Transgressions of God's people caused God's name to be blasphemed (*Romans 2:24*). Blasphemy is to be distinguished from atheism, sacrilege, and criticism of religion. But in moral theology, it is often regarded as a sin against the virtue of religion. In 16th and 17th c. England it was dissent from the current religious dogma.

Blasphemy was severely punished under Jewish (*Leviticus 24:16; 1 Kings 21:10*), Greek (considered a crime against God and society), Justinian, medieval laws. In most countries it is still forbidden by law; since the Enlightenment, however, it is regarded as an offense against society rather than God. Christians regard it as a grave or mortal sin.

What is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? The sin that will not be forgiven is not just blasphemy, but blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this specificity is made clear when Jesus distinguishes between the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit and the blasphemy of the Son. "And whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." [Matthew 12:32] This distinction is key, when we understand the difference between speaking against the Son and the speaking against the Holy Spirit, then we will find what Jesus is speaking of when He names the "sin that will not be forgiven." Walther will be our teacher.

Walther on the Unforgiven Sin. The first president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod was C. F. W. Walther. He also was a pastor and a professor at the seminary in St Louis where he gave lectures on Friday nights to the students. These lectures he called the "Lutheran Hour", sitting at the feet of Luther and learning from him how to be a pastor in the Lord's church. Walther's topic on these Friday night lectures was the proper distinction of law and Gospel. He wrote and defended 25 theses on the

topic. Thesis 24 has to do with the unforgiven sin, and reads as follows:

Thesis XXIV.

In the twentieth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the unforgiven sin against the Holy Ghost is described in a manner as if it could not be forgiven because of its magnitude.



C. F. W. Walther

Walther makes some distinctions that help us understand what the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is.

First, this sin is not blasphemy of the *person* of the Holy Spirit, but the *office* and *work* of the Holy Spirit.

“Accordingly, the meaning of this passage cannot be that the unforgivable sin is blasphemy against the person of the Holy Spirit; for blasphemy against the Father and the Son is exactly the same sin. The blasphemy to which our text refers is directed *against the office*, or operation, of the Holy Spirit; whoever spurns the office of the Holy Spirit, his sin cannot be forgiven. The office of the Holy Spirit is to call men to Christ and to keep them with Him.” [Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, p 393]

The Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, creates faith in us which take a hold of Jesus' work. To despise and spurn the work of the Holy Spirit is to reject the grace and promises of Jesus.

Second, this sin remains unforgiven not because of its magnitude but because of its type.

- “The sin is not unpardonable because of its magnitude, -for the apostle, as we heard, has distinctly declared: 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound,' -but because the person committing this sin rejects the only means by which he can be brought to repentance, faith, and steadfastness in faith.” [Law and Gospel, p 398]
- “A person who has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost is condemned not so much on account of this sin as rather on account of his unbelief.” [Law and Gospel, p 400]
- “This is not a jesting matter; for unless the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, we shall never attain it. Whoever rejects the Holy Spirit is beyond help, even by God.” [Law and Gospel, p 395]

It is easy for us to imagine that this sin is unforgiven because it is so bad. But all sin alienates us from God and His perfection, one no less than another. “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” [James 2:10] It is part of our sinful flesh that we weigh and try to balance out our sins with our good works, that we attempt to measure the magnitude of our sin. We grade sin. This person lives an “A” life, this guy over here is a bit worse, he gets a “C”. Failure is reserved for the worst, the terrorists, they get an “F”. But James won't allow such thoughts, Jesus won't allow them, failure at one point is a breaking of the whole law, an “F” in Good Works 101. “Be holy as My Father in heaven is Holy,” anything less than perfection is failure.

We know, then, that one sin is no more forgivable than another because of its magnitude. Jesus' death was required for each sin, even the sins we consider “least.” And more, the precious blood of Jesus is of more value than the “greatest” sin. If we think that a sin is unforgivable because of its magnitude, because it is so terrible, then we cheapen the cross of Christ and treat the treasure of Jesus'

blood as mere pocket change.

Third, the symptoms of committing this sin is not terror or fear but lack of concern or even delight in speaking ill of God and His gifts. We here see Walther's pastoral approach to the discussion of the unforgiven sin.

- “As regards people who are distressed because they think they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, they would not feel distressed if they really had committed that sin and were in that awful condition of heart, but they would find their constant delight in blaspheming the Gospel. However, Christians in distress still have faith, and the Spirit of God is working in them; and if the Spirit of God is working in them, they have not committed the sin against the Holy Ghost.” [*Law and Gospel*, p 399]
- Walther quotes Luther in this regard: “This sin is unto death when it is defended after having been sufficiently revealed and recognized as a sin, because it resists the grace of God, the means of grace, and the forgiveness of sin. Where there is no knowledge of sin, there is no forgiveness. For the forgiveness of sin is preached to those who feel their sin and are seeking the grace of God. *But these persons* [who have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost] *are not frightened by any scruples of conscience*, nor do they recognize and feel their sin.” [*Law and Gospel*, p 398]

If you are worried that you have committed the unforgiveable sin then you haven't; your worry in itself is indicative of the work of the Holy Spirit, the first part of repentance: contrition. Of course the Holy Spirit also desires to comfort us with the promise of the forgiveness of sins and bring us to the second part of repentance: faith in the promise of the absolution.

Walther warns against committing this sin, which is a warning against considering sin lightly and rejecting the prompting of the Holy Spirit's call to repentance:

- “Let everyone beware of resisting the Holy Ghost. When a sin has been revealed to him and his own heart affirms that it is a sin, let not his mouth deny the fact. That may not yet be the sin against the Holy Ghost, but it may be a step in that direction. There are many people who admit that we all sin in many ways every day, but when they are reprov'd, they claim that they never harmed a child.” [*Law and Gospel*, p 398-399]

In this regard it is worth pondering thesis 7 and 12 of Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*:

- “The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God. “
- “In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.”

Luther's Works, 31.40

Finally, then, we can have a definition of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit:

- “Here we have the record of an actual blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. Then Christ, by the

finger of God, cast out devils, the Pharisees, who had come down from Jerusalem, declared this operation of the Holy Spirit a work of the devil. They were convinced in their hearts that it was a divine work, but since the Savior had rebuked them for their hypocrisy and mien of sanctimoniousness they conceived a deadly hatred against Christ, and that incited them to blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. Accordingly we have here this explanation offered us: To declare a *work* of the Holy Ghost a work of the devil when one is convinced that it is a work of the Holy Ghost, that is blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.” [Law and Gospel, p 394]

- Walther quotes Baier, the Lutheran dogmatician's definition: “The most grievous of all actual sins, which is called the sin against the Holy Ghost, consists in a malicious renunciation and blasphemous and obstinate assaults upon the heavenly truth which had once upon a time been known by the person committing this sin.” [Law and Gospel, p 399]

See also the following texts:

Hebrews 6:4-8

For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame.

1 John 5:16

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This text points us to a major theme of the Scriptures: Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit in the fullest measure. The reason Jesus is discussing the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is because the Pharisees had done it! How? Did they not accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebub? How is this blaspheming the Holy Spirit instead of Jesus?

The answer is found in Jesus' response: “If I cast out demons *by the Spirit of God* then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” [12:28] Because Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit, and more, because Jesus works miracles by the Holy Spirit (in fact it was by the Holy Spirit that the demon was cast out) the Pharisees were calling the Holy Spirit the Devil. Thus their accusing Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebub is a blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

Consider the following Scripture texts that speak of Jesus and the Holy Spirit:

- There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. [Isaiah 11:1-2]
- Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom



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my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
[Isaiah 42:1, note that this text is quoted in Matthew 12:18]

- The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. [Isaiah 61:1, read by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth, Luke 4:18]
- For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. [John 3:34]
- As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. [Acts 10:36-38]
- See also Psalm 45:7 (quoted in Hebrews 1:9) and Jesus' baptism (i.e. Matthew 3:16 and especially John 1:33).

What does this mean? Concerning Jesus as anointed by the Holy Spirit, consider the following quotations:

- “Human nature was created in the beginning that it might be a partaker of the Spirit and exist in the image of God. But through sin the Spirit was lost. Therefore, God in His desire to restore us willed that Christ in a special way should establish a second beginning for the race.” [Cyril, *Dialogus*, bk 6, quoted in Martin Chemnitz *The Two Natures of Christ*, p 151] Chemnitz then comments, “In this way the Spirit could remain in Him with the human race.”
- Again, Chemnitz quoting Cyril, “The Logos was made man in order that in Him and in Him alone the nature of man might be crowned with the praises of innocence and enriched by the Spirit, who would no longer depart, as He had in the case of Adam, but would remain in him, and thus man might be formed anew unto God through sanctification. For the grace received in Christ has also come to us, because He is the Firstborn among us and a kind of second beginning of our race.” [Two Natures, p 151]
- For our comfort we should consider why Scripture speaks this way [about Jesus being anointed by the Holy Spirit], namely, that Adam through the Fall lost the Holy Spirit, and the flesh, because of its depravity, was not able to contain the Holy Spirit. But in the person of Christ human nature was again anointed with the Spirit, not in small measure but in such a way that He exercises all of His divine powers in Christ's human nature. In this way the Spirit with His gifts is poured out upon all flesh (Acts 2:4ff). So also Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me.” Isaiah 11:2, “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him.” Acts 10:38, “God has anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.” John 3:34, “Whom God has sent, to Him He gives not His Spirit by measure.” Although no creature could give the Holy Spirit, Christ because of His unction and by means of His physical breath did give the Holy Spirit to the apostles (John 20:22). Further, the union is by the Spirit, not only for the sake of His own person (so to speak), but in order that we also may receive of His fullness, and Peter says in Acts 2:32-33, “. . . who was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God, having received the promise of the Spirit.” He has poured out the Holy Spirit in visible form and with His visible gifts upon the apostles. This statement is most comforting, because Christ as the Firstborn has received gifts from His Father according to His assumed human nature for the benefit of men (Ps 68:18). He is worthy to receive them (Rev. 5:12), while we are most unworthy. But having received these gifts, He does not keep them for Himself alone, but because we are His brothers according to His assumed human nature (Heb 2:11ff.) and the flesh of His flesh (Eph 5:30), He gives, communicates, and distributes them to His brothers according to His assumed nature, as the Head to its members. [Two Natures, p 328-329]