

A Challenging Question

One of the most commonly asked Bible questions relates to the words of Jesus found in Mark 3:28-29: *“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”*.

Every sincere student of the Scripture wants to know the meaning of this puzzling text. Some who read this verse fear that they may have committed this “unpardonable sin” and thus are beyond the scope of God’s saving grace with no remedy. Others, with good intentions, appear to replace the sin of which Jesus speaks by other known acts that might be considered unforgivable (like unbelief or any other transgression concerning which there is no repentance). What then is the meaning of this important statement by Jesus? Let’s investigate the issue together.

The Context of the Statement

This statement of Jesus was uttered in connection with one of His wonderful miracles (Mt. 12:22-37; Mk. 3:20-30). These miracles were remarkable demonstrations of His divine power and were intended by God to authenticate Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah of OT Scripture (Jn. 5:36). Matthew reports that Jesus on this occasion healed a demon-possessed man who was both dumb and blind. The scribes or Pharisees could not deny the reality of the power demonstrated by Him. Therefore, they attributed the miraculous work to Satan saying, “He is possessed by

Beelzebul,” and “He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons.” (Mk. 3:22). It was this statement that appears to have initiated the warning of Jesus about blaspheming the Spirit (Mk. 3:30).

Blasphemy against the Spirit

The sin Jesus specifies in this text is “blasphemy against the Spirit”.¹ The term “blasphemy” conveys the idea of “speaking against” the Holy Spirit.² In this case the Pharisees’ words were directed against the Holy Spirit; for Jesus Himself acknowledged that His miracles were performed by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:28). When the scribes and Pharisees attributed Jesus’ miracles to a Satanic source, saying that He had an “unclean” spirit, they were indeed “blaspheming” the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus warned that this “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” had both a lasting effect and a severe consequence. It was an “eternal sin” that placed the one who uttered such words beyond the scope of God’s forgiveness.

But Why Not Forgivable?

What usually puzzles us is why such a sin should be considered unpardonable. Is not God’s saving grace, extended through Jesus’ atoning death, not adequate to make forgiveness of this sin possible? Is this sin greater the other wicked things that men may do and for which there is forgiveness? Why then did Jesus say the person who commits this sin “never has forgiveness”?

It is clear that Jesus contrasts this sin with “blasphemy against the Son of man” which he

said could be forgiven. Perhaps a clue can be found in this self-designation, “Son of man”. This commonly used personal description of Jesus was His own identification with humanity.³ As such it admits the possibility that men might speak against or blaspheme Him as a human being without an understanding of either His holiness or His divine nature, which was obscured by His human form. In view of such, this might be forgivable, since God had in His word warned of the possibility of false prophets performing pseudo-miracles to lead others astray.⁴ However, to blaspheme the Spirit was to speak against Him who was unmistakably both holy and divine and to attribute to Satan a work that was manifestly divine.

Why such a sin was not forgivable Jesus does not explicitly say; but perhaps we might infer from the statement an explanation that fits the context and the remainder of God’s revelation. The miracles performed by the power of the Spirit were intended to provide evidence to the honest observer that Jesus was indeed a great teacher who had come from God (cf. Jn. 3:2). It was through this process of authentication that virtually all the prophets had established their God-ordained mission.⁵ In the nature of the case, to attribute the miracles of Jesus to a Satanic source—to blaspheme the Spirit—was to refuse to acknowledge or accept the very basis for faith in Jesus as God’s messenger and for repentance in view of the prophet’s claims and message (Jn. 20:30-31). To reject Jesus’ miracles was to place oneself beyond the possibility of forgiveness.

Did Anyone Actually Commit the Sin of Blasphemy?

Perhaps one might contend that Jesus’ warning about blaspheming the Spirit was intended to sober those who had uttered an initial observation that they had spoken thoughtlessly or carelessly about Jesus. This idea could be supported by Jesus’ later reference to the “careless words” that men may speak (Mt. 12:36-37). However, it would be hard to see how any other utterance could be more blasphemous than that which had been spoken by the Pharisees when they called the Holy Spirit of God “unclean” or demonic.

Consequently, I am inclined to believe that the scribes and Pharisees had indeed committed the sin concerning which Jesus gave warning, a sin that placed them beyond the scope of faith and repentance. Moreover, their subsequent actions seem to vindicate Jesus’ statement; for those who had on this occasion attributed Jesus’ miracles to Satan appear to have been the very ones responsible for His death (Jn. 11:47-53). Their continued hardness of heart led them to crucify Him rather than believe in Him. They had indeed reflected an attitude of heart that put them beyond God’s forgiveness, committing an eternal sin from which it appears they never turned.⁶

Can This Sin Be Committed Today?

Though some have affirmed that it is necessary to actually duplicate the experience of the Pharisees (i.e. personally see a miracle

of Jesus) in order to blaspheme the Spirit, it appears to me that people today may similarly reject the evidence that the gospel writers have testified concerning Jesus with the same outcome. If one today, like the Pharisees, acknowledges that Jesus did indeed perform miracles, but affirms that these miracles were accomplished by the power of Satan, then he too might be considered to have blasphemed the Spirit.

I hasten to add that such hardened statements of fully-informed disbelief should be distinguished from the skepticism that often attends the ignorance of Scripture or the initial process of investigation of the Biblical evidence. We need not affirm that every once-professing atheist or agnostic, or every person who has struggled with the credibility of the gospel, has blasphemed the Spirit. In some cases, those who approach the Biblical evidence with a healthy skepticism do indeed eventually find it compelling and are led through it to believe in Jesus. I would suggest that those who worry about having committed blasphemy against the Spirit probably have not.

However, there seems to be clear evidence in Scripture that men may, by their hardness of heart and progressive unbelief, place themselves beyond the point of return. When one evaluates the evidence concerning Jesus' life and His claim to be God and he progresses in unbelief to the point that he attributes His deeds to Satan, such a person may well have reached that point of no return. The sad reality of the gospel is that some who understand the evidence do not have the intrinsic goodness or honesty of heart to accept the implications of

that evidence. In so doing they reveal a hardened impenitence that will last to eternity. Such people may be considered to be "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" that God has in this creation endured in view of those to whom He has granted mercy through faith and acceptance of the gospel (Rom. 11:22-24).

As for those who believe and respond to the gospel there is a certain hope of forgiveness and eternal life. They need not worry that they have committed blasphemy against the Spirit and that forgiveness is not available to them.

- ¹ There are other sins that one may commit against the Holy Spirit that do not involve blasphemy against Him (Cf. Eph. 4:30, Heb. 10:29).
- ² Our word "blasphemy" transliterates the Greek word found here. Lexicographers usually define the word as evil speech against either God or men.
- ³ Though the phrase "son of man" calls attention to Jesus' humanity, it is possible to see in it also a Messianic meaning based on Daniel's prophecy of the kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14). As such, in view of other OT texts, even this phrase might also call attention to Jesus' divine nature.
- ⁴ God had warned His people in the Law not to listen to false prophets who appeared to perform signs, but whose message contradicted the revealed will of God (Deut. 13:1-5). However, Jesus' miracle accompanied no false teaching, but was intended instead to promote allegiance to the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28).
- ⁵ Consider for example the miracles of Moses, Elijah, and Elisha among others.
- ⁶ We do know that some of the Pharisees, like Nicodemus, expressed a more open-minded attitude toward Jesus and eventually believed in Him (Jn. 7:50-53; Jn. 19:39-40). But it seems unlikely that men like him would be among those who make these drastic charges.

This tract was written by Johnny Felker.

If you would like to study this subject or other Biblical topics further please let us know how we can help you.



We would be honored to have you visit with us at Perry Heights at any of our services.

**Sun. 9:00 a.m. (Bible class)
9:55 a.m. (Worship service)
6:00 p.m. (Worship service)
Wed. 7:00 p.m. (Bible class)**

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Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit



An Eternal Sin

What is blasphemy against the Spirit? Why did Jesus say that there is no forgiveness for this sin? Read inside for a discussion of this important Bible topic.