

Salvation: Here A Little; There A Little

Blasphemy Against The Holy Spirit

Introduction

“Blaspheming the Holy Spirit,” “sinning against the Holy Spirit,” and “the unforgivable and unpardonable sin” are all terms that many people dread to talk about or discuss. Most Christians have heard that somewhere there is written an unforgivable sin that causes a person to be beyond hope and they know that all of those phrases are somehow associated with that sin, and most Christians have at one time struggled with and wondered whether they have committed such a sin. These fears are bred from the many misnomers and false teachings about this subject that have resulted from people not taking the statements of Jesus in full context and not taking the whole counsel of God on the subject.

I personally remember very vividly a well-meaning Sunday School teacher that taught us eight and nine year old boys that “nobody knew what the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Ghost really was” and that through much prayer and fasting she believed that using bywords and slang expressions was getting dangerously close to that unforgivable sin! Her teaching had an effect because for the next several days some normally excited boys were very quite and extremely polite! My mother noticed the difference and asked me, “okay, what is wrong?” When she found out what had happened, she laughed hysterically and then reassured me that although I probably needed to be more careful about the words that I was using, that bywords and slang was not the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and that if I repented to God, I probably still had a chance of going to heaven. I think she added at the end something like, “that is, you have a chance to go to heaven if you obey and respect your mother!” Mom was always one to capitalize on a situation like that!

This humorous, real-life story illustrates the confusion that results when people do not study all of what the Word of God has to say on a subject and take all of it together in context. I have heard some preachers preach that the unforgivable sin was unforgiveness or any willful sin after a person received the Holy Spirit. Both of these statements are false. It is true that unforgiveness causes God to bring back our sins against us, but the moment we forgive others, God forgives us! And, as we have seen in these lessons, willful sin – while always serious – can be forgiven.

Let us endeavor to take the whole counsel of God on this matter because Christians do need to know beyond a shadow of doubt what the unforgivable sin is. Having studying it thoroughly, I can tell you that if you are interested in it and worried about it and want to correct such errors, then all of that is a good sign that you probably have not yet committed this sin!

A Survey of Scriptures

Let us begin by examining all of the scriptures on this subject. The phrase “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” was coined by Jesus and it was He who first taught the concept that such a sin was unforgivable. Three of the Gospels record this teaching of Christ: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John does not mention it in his Gospel but refers to it in a later writing in the book of 1 John. We will take them in order and compare and contrast them:

Matt 12:31-32 Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 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.

Perhaps a general definition might be in order. The word “blasphemy” is *blasphemia* in the Greek and means “to speak contemptuously; to slander; to speak against another’s good name; to speak against; to speak in such a manner as refusing to give proper reverence to majesty.”

From this scripture in the Gospel of Matthew several points are of note: First, not all sins of blasphemy are unforgivable, but only blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. There is a difference, then, between the ordinary sin of blasphemy and blasphemy against the Spirit. When you speak evil of your neighbor, you blaspheme them. When you talk bad about somebody in a way that hurts their good name, that is blasphemy against your neighbor. That is sin and the sin of evil speaking needs to be overcome through submitting to the Word of God and the Spirit of God, but we must realize that such blasphemies are not the unforgivable sin.

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Blasphemy is most often used in scripture to denote evil speaking against God. For example, the Pharisees considered Jesus' claim of being God as blasphemous and it was for this "crime" that He was put to death on the cross¹. In the Old Testament, saying that God was not real was considered blasphemy². Furthermore, cursing God's name was considered blasphemy³. And in the early apostolic church, denouncing that Jesus Christ was the Messiah was akin to blasphemy⁴.

Blasphemy against God and the flesh that He became, Jesus Christ, is serious but is not the unforgivable sin. Jesus said that blasphemy against the Son of Man would be forgiven, so the unforgivable sin is not just speaking against Christ and denying Jesus as the Messiah or such. Blasphemy against God in any way and speaking words that hurt or deny His majesty are sin but not the unforgivable sin. Paul wrote to the church in Colossi and said:

Col 3:7-8 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. NIV

The word translated as "slander" is *blasphemia* in the Greek. The people of the Colossian church had blasphemed in many ways in the past and yet now were commanded to put aside such things. Obviously, the sin of blasphemy in itself is not the unforgivable sin. Specifically, the unforgivable sin is "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." Keeping that in mind, let us move on to the Gospel of Mark:

Mark 3:28-30 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Mark reiterates what Matthew recorded but adds extra information that ties the teachings of Jesus to the context of what had just happened. Jesus warned against blasphemy against the Holy Spirit immediately after the Pharisees said of Jesus, "He has an unclean spirit." This is key. There are many ways to speak against the Holy Spirit, but of these only one is the unforgivable sin. And we must use the context of the scripture to determine which it is.

Before we move on, let us glance at Luke's teaching:

Luke 12:10 And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Luke gives us no new information but simply reinforces that blasphemy against the Son of Man is forgivable and also reiterates that this sin is a "speaking sin." That is important because Jesus taught elsewhere that "from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" so blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is at its root an attitude toward the moving of the Spirit of God that manifests itself through speech. It is more than just saying certain words or phrases but is dangerous attitude that people develop toward the Holy Spirit.

John's teaching on the matter comes in his later writings:

1 John 5:16-17 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death. NIV

John teaches us that there is "a sin" – meaning only one – that leads to death and which cannot be repented of. Of course, all sin if unrepented leads to death, but in this case John is referring back to the teachings of Jesus that we just read. John purpose of writing here was to showcase the importance of repentance and how that all sins – with the one exception – are forgivable. John's teaching here adds several important points to remember: first, there is only one sin that is the unforgivable, not two or three or whatever. Second, if a person has truly committed the

¹ See Matthew 26:65.

² See 2 Samuel 12:14.

³ See Leviticus 24:10-16.

⁴ See Acts 26:11.

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unforgivable sin, there is no point in believers praying for that person any more. Third, for this to be true, then we must be able to easily see, understand, and identify when a person has committed the unforgivable sin. If we are not to pray for a person who has crossed this line, then we must be able through scripture to identify clearly without a doubt what this sin is! With all due respect, my Sunday School teacher of old was mistaken when she said that “nobody knows what the unforgivable sin really is.” For the teachings of John to mean anything, then with careful study, we must be able to be sure and know what it is and easily recognize when someone crosses the line.

What has our survey of all of the scriptures on the subject showed us? Here is a quick summary:

There is only one specific sin that is unforgivable, and that is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit in the way that the Pharisees were approaching in the context of Jesus’ teaching. Furthermore, blasphemy against the Son of Man and all other kinds can be forgiven. Moreover, we are given in scripture all the clues that we need to easily be able to clearly identify this unpardonable sin.

Seeing as the distinction between blasphemy against the “Son of Man” and that of against the Holy Spirit and the issue of understanding the context of the comments of Jesus are the two keys to understanding what the unforgivable sin is, let’s take them one by one.

Blaspheming the Son of Man Versus Blaspheming the Spirit

Matt 12:32 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.

What is the difference between speaking against the Son of Man and against the Holy Spirit? The Bible teaches that there is only one God and that He became flesh for the purpose of shedding blood to pay the price for our sins. Furthermore, the titles of God such as “Father, Son of Man, Son of God, Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost” are titles only and not names, but refer to the various roles that God has taken in dealing with mankind. For example, God is our “Father” in that He created all things but even more specifically in that He adopts Spirit-filled believers as becoming “children of God.” He also is Father in the sense that the Spirit overshadowed Mary and caused conception to birth the Savior Jesus Christ. In this sense, Jesus was the “Son of God” or the offspring or result of that conception process.

The terms, “Son of God” or “Son of Man” always refer to the flesh that God became, born of a virgin. They never speak of deity without flesh. The Bible does not speak of Jesus as a part of God or as another separate and distinct from the Father, but teaches that He is the image of the invisible God and that all of the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him, bodily⁵. He was the Word or thought and plan of God made flesh and therefore God Himself coming in flesh⁶.

The term “Spirit of God” or “Holy Spirit” refers to the specific role of God dealing with and among and in the lives of humanity. There is only one Spirit and the Lord Jesus is that Spirit⁷. Furthermore since God alone is Holy and God is Spirit, the one God of the Old Testament who is Father of all and who manifested Himself in flesh in the Son born to Mary is the Holy Spirit. Having more than one title does not make God plural any more than I being a father, son, and husband am plural. Such teaching is the subject for another series, but if we are to try to make titles of God into separate persons, then why stop with just three titles when there are over 1,200 titles of God in scripture?

Some Trinitarians have tried to use this scripture as a proof text for “proving” that the Son and the Holy Spirit are “separate persons in the Godhead.” A Trinitarian definition of God, however, states that there are “three separate persons in one Godhead that are coequal and co-powerful. If this is so and “God the Son” and “God the Holy Spirit” are distinct but coequal then why would blasphemy against one not be as severe as against the other? They are only coequal if they are both equal on all terms. Scripture therefore rejects this possibility of interpretation.

There is a distinction here intended, but let’s not stretch that distinction beyond what Jesus meant. “Son of Man” specifically refers and emphasizes the flesh in which God was revealed to this world. As already stated, the title,

⁵ See Colossians 1:15 and 2:9.

⁶ See 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁷ See Ephesians 4:4-5 and 2 Corinthians 3:17.

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“Holy Spirit” refers to the Spirit of God working in great power among men and women on this earth. Herein lies the distinction intended by Jesus. A person could commit blasphemy against the man, Christ Jesus – that is deny verbally and mentally the belief that He is God, the Messiah, and the Savior – and yet find a place of repentance. But speaking against the moving of the Holy Spirit in our lives place in danger of getting close to the unforgivable sin and requires us to need to be warned. These scriptures go along with what we have been studying recently in these lessons that if we ever reach a place where the Holy Spirit cannot move us or convict us, then we are in danger of crossing a line where we can never again be reached.

All of us have grieved, quenched, or resisted the Holy Spirit at one time or another, but where do we approach the line of the unforgivable? That answer is found in understanding the context of Jesus’ comments.

The Context of Jesus’ Teaching on the Unforgivable Sin

Before Jesus made His warning against blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, He had just performed a notable miracle with the Pharisees and Sadducees watching:

Matt 12:22-24 Then a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute was brought to him, and he healed him, so that the man spoke and saw. 23 And all the people were amazed, and said, "Can this be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

When Jesus healed this demon-oppressed man who was both blind and mute, the people were amazed and began to realize His true identity as the long-awaited Christ and Savior! When the Pharisees realized that many were beginning to believe in Christ, they attacked and said, “He gets His power from the devil and that is why the demons listen to Him.” Jesus had just done a great work by the power of the Spirit of God and yet the Pharisees began to attribute the working of the true Spirit of God to that of demonic forces.

And it was this point that Jesus pointed out that the illogicalness of their accusation and then warned them about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. After they had wrote off the true moving of the Spirit of God as if it were demonic forces that were at work, then Jesus brought up the unforgivable sin and made the distinction between the manifestation of God in flesh that they were seeing work and the Holy Spirit that was to work through true believers in the age to come. Mark noted well the context as to why Jesus brought up the unforgivable sin when he wrote:

Mark 3:28-30 "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

Jesus brought all of this up when they began to say that there was an unclean or demonic spirit working within Him to do the miraculous works.

When a person rejects the operation of the Spirit of God in their life and verbally attributes that work to some other source, then that is blasphemy because it denies the majesty of the One who is doing the work. For example, for God to work a miracle of deliverance or healing and to give “luck” or “the body” credit when it was God that did it is blasphemy – a forgivable kind of blasphemy, but blasphemy none the less.

When a person feels the Spirit of God moving in their lives and sees the Spirit of God doing great and notable things and yet say that the Spirit of God is really the moving of the spirit of Satan, then they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit. If every time a person feels the moving of God’s Spirit tugging at their heart, they resist saying that it is the power of the devil, then they have placed themselves in a place where they cannot yield to God and where the reaching of God’s Spirit is inoperable in their life because it cannot properly do what it came to do. If they say that the conviction of the Holy Spirit is the devil working, then how will they ever repent and get things right with God?

It is important to note that Jesus did not say that the Pharisees had committed the unforgivable sin and were unreachable. In fact, Jesus kept trying to reach the Pharisees with truth after this instance, but they were getting close enough to illicit a warning from the Master’s lips. What this means is that “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is not just a one time verbal statement but is rather an attitude that people can develop where they treat the moving

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of the Spirit of God as some demonic force and do not appropriately and biblically respond. By denying the full validity of the Spirit of God to move in their life they have reached a place where they are unreachable.

Many denominations today teach that signs and evidences of the Holy Spirit moving such as speaking in tongues and miracles are demonic and of the devil. What they are in effect doing by having such an attitude is stopping the Holy Spirit from ever moving in their churches. How can God move if every time that He tries, the people say it is the devil showing up?

When Saul/Paul had God miraculously and forcefully stop him that day on the road to Damascus and he asked the question, "who are you, Lord?" and he got the answer, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,"⁸ what would have happened if Saul/Paul would have stood up from the road and said, "sorry guys, I'm having trouble with my eyes because of sunstroke or something and the devil must really be coming against us in our quest to persecute these Christians, but let's press on and take these Jesus' name people out?" Saul would have never found a place of repentance and would have never become the great Apostle Paul who wrote two-thirds of the New Testament! Thank God that Paul did not respond that way, but, unfortunately, many have responded that way since to the supernatural moving of the Holy Spirit. When the moving of the Spirit contradicts their man-made and man-taught traditions, many are quick to write off the Spirit as demonic rather than be forced to admit that some of their doctrines of men are wrong! They have reached a dangerous place: they have not repented of rejecting the working of the Spirit in their life because they will not listen to the Spirit telling them to repent!

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit in Ignorance

Before we sum up and by scripture define the unforgivable sin, there is one other condition taught by scripture that we must consider. Before his conversion, Paul was a Pharisee and was of the belief that the workings of the Spirit of God were of the devil⁹. He persecuted the early apostolic church because he truly believed that they were an enemy of the true kingdom of God. In doing so, Paul blasphemed everything holy, including the work of the Holy Spirit. And yet despite all of this, Paul found forgiveness and so we learn from Paul's own writings why he was forgiven:

1 Tim 1:12-13 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,

Paul must be talking about the serious sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or he would have not felt need to tell us why he received mercy for it. Because he had blasphemed the Holy Spirit in ignorance and unbelief, he was forgiven. Ignorantly in unbelief, means that Paul was unlearned about the moving of the Holy Spirit and had not yet experienced the infilling of the Holy Spirit, himself. Therefore, he was granted mercy and forgiveness.

God is no respecter of persons! Just because a person equates the moving of the Spirit of God or tongues or miracles to the devil does not mean that they can never be forgiven. Because if they have never received the gift of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues, they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit but done it from a position of ignorance. Like the Apostle Paul, it is then possible to find a place of mercy and forgiveness and this explains why Jesus never said that the Pharisees had actually committed the unforgivable sin. They were speaking of the working of Jesus as demonic in ignorance having never received the gift of the Holy Spirit themselves. But they were getting close enough for Jesus to warn them about it!

Only when a person has truly been born again of water and of Spirit and has been taught about such things to the point where they understand what has happened, can they commit the unpardonable sin. A person may have ignorantly blasphemed against the Holy Spirit and be forgiven but once a person has believed and has received the indwelling Spirit of God, then God views speaking such blasphemy against His Spirit in a much more severe light.

What is the Unforgivable Sin?

⁸ See the 9th chapter of Acts.

⁹ See Acts 22:3-5.

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We now can from scripture clearly answer the question! The unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is:

When a person who has believed in Christ, repented of their sins, been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit and knows what has happened to them and has been taught so that they understand what has happened to them, yet turns away from God and backslides not just back into sin but reaches a place where they develop an attitude that every time they see the working of the Holy Spirit and feel the presence of God, they mentally and verbally attribute it to the devil and not of God, then they have reached a state where the Spirit of God has no effect on them. God cannot forgive a person in such a state because they have reached a place where they will not truly repent and thus have caused the grace of God to be for naught!

Conclusion

This lesson works with the previous two lessons of this series to emphasize the danger of a person refusing the sacrifice of Christ by refusing to genuinely repent when they sin. Repentance is more than just saying, "I'm sorry" but is an action and an attitude. We must repent the right way and scripture is replete with those who did and did not repent correctly.

Heb 12:15-17 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; 16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Esau sought repentance with tears, but "found no chance to repent" because he was repenting the wrong way. Esau has sold his birthright, his spiritual blessing, to Jacob and when Jacob received the blessing, Esau became bitter. Esau repented still desiring the inheritance. In other words, the only reason that Esau suddenly felt the need to repent was not because he realized his great wrong at not desiring the precious things of God, but because he realized that he had just lost a blessing that had turned out worth something. Esau was repenting only because his sin hurt him and not because he realized that he had hurt God. He was the child saying, "I'm sorry" only because they were caught stealing from the cookie jar. True repentance is a revelation and recognition that our sin hurts God whether anybody else or not finds out about it. And true repentance is asking for forgiveness with the intentions of making a true change in our behavior with God's help, and not just asking God to "undo" the punishment for what we have done wrong.

In similar fashion, King Saul of the Old Testament did not truly repent although he went through the motions of repentance because he kept doing things his own way. David on the other hand admitted that he had sinned against God and realized that God was not interested in excuses or sacrifices. King David prayed:

Ps 51:16-17 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Attitude is a most important element in repentance! If we say "I'm sorry" and yet do not change our mind about our sin, then our prayer has done no good and we have not truly repented.

So when Jesus warned the Pharisees of the unforgivable sin when they attributed the working of God to the wrong spirit, He was doing so because He knew that if a person ever reached a place where they *would* not respond to the conditions of repentance, then the person would eventually reach a place where they *could* not respond to the conditions of repentance. God has given man a choice and unlimited freedom to choose between living a life of sin or a life according to God's Word. When that freedom is abused to the point that the Spirit of God no longer has any effect on the believer's life, then that person has placed themselves in a place where true repentance is not possible. If every time a person feels the Spirit of God dealing with them or working, they have the attitude that it is the working of the devil, they have started down a dark, dark road. If a person does so after they have personally experienced the infilling power of the Spirit of God and received the revelation of truth for themselves, then they cross a line where they place themselves by their own actions and attitude beyond the grace of God. Let us never reach a place where we are in danger of crossing such a line!