

WHAT IS THE BLASPHEMY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

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The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is a phrase that traces its origin to the words of Christ in the midst of His “Busy Day,” a part of which includes the events of Mark 3 and Matthew 12.¹ While all the synoptic Gospels mention the phrase (Mark 3:29; Matt. 12:31; Luke 12:10), the passage in Luke postdates the narrative of the other two Gospels, describing later ministry in Judea.

The miraculous work of this ministry of the Savior often included exorcism, and the unbelieving Pharisees had developed a party-line explanation for these miracles in response to their irrepressible results: “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 9:34). We are introduced to the phrase, *blasphemy of the Holy Spirit*, when Christ responds to this accusation. Mark provides a brief account of the related discussion as part of his chronology of the Lord’s ministry, whereas Matthew presents the related material in a more fully-developed topical fashion, along with other theological troubles the Lord was having with the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath and signs.

Mark tells us that Christ spoke in parables as He led up to his warning about the Holy Spirit (3:23). The Lord points out the absurdity of the Pharisee’s claim, for “if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand!” We next sense the solemnity of the Lord’s tone as He begins with the words, *Truly I say to you* (Mark 3:28).² Mark includes the following propositions of the Lord’s warning: (1) the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is exceptional in that it shall not be forgiven; (2) the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit makes one guilty of an eternal sin; and (3) the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit had to be mentioned because the Pharisees were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Matthew tells us two more important truths related to Christ’s warning, which further help us understand its meaning. First, Matt. 12:31 begins with the phrase *διὰ τοῦτο* (*because of this*), and it tells us that the reason Christ gave the warning against the blasphemy of the Holy Ghost is found in verse 30, “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. Because of this I

say unto you . . .”³ Second, Matthew further interprets for us Christ’s warning with a section not found in the other Gospels. After issuing His warning, Christ speaks of trees and fruit (Matt. 12:33-37).⁴ Good trees bear good fruit, and bad trees bear bad fruit. It is significant that few answers to the question, “What is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit?”, have been developed with any consideration of these critical verses. Instead, answers typically rely on one of two methodologies, either the systematic-theological approach to the question, which defines the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit in terms of what theology says is unpardonable, or the biblical-theological approach, which defines the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit more narrowly in terms of what the passage says the Pharisees were actually doing.

Representatives of the systematic approach see the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as a subtopic of a larger theme, the unpardonable sin. This approach seeks to correlate Mark 3 and Matthew 12 with other passages of Scripture that mention God’s work of reprobation (Gen. 6:3; Num. 15:30-31; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31; some also 1 John 5:16).⁵ Yet there are wide variations on this theme.

John R. Rice saw the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as a deadline, a potential point of no return for any sinner who rejects the gospel.⁶ Here the distinction between blaspheming the Son and blaspheming the Spirit is not well-defined. Seeking to provide for that distinction, John Calvin taught that the sin is not experienced by all lost sinners, but rather only by those “who maliciously turn to his [own] dishonour the perfections of God, which have been revealed to him by the Spirit.”⁷ D. A. Carson develops Calvin’s distinction further. He says that blasphemy against the Son is the rejection of the gospel, but blasphemy of the Spirit is “rejection of the same truth in full awareness that that is exactly what one is doing—thoughtfully, willfully, and self-consciously rejecting the work of the Spirit.”⁸ Abraham Kuyper moves a step closer to the biblical-theological method by emphasizing Mark’s explanation of Christ’s statement, “because they said He had an unclean spirit,” as he too tries to conclude that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is an act that causes a sinner’s reprobation.⁹

But the systematic-theological method has considerable trouble articulating the nature of reprobation from Mark 3 and Matthew 12. For example, Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, was also a blasphemer, yet he obtained mercy because he did it “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13). It is difficult to distinguish between the blasphemy of Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee of Christ’s day, and that of these other Pharisees of Christ’s day in the way the systematic-theological approach requires. Under this approach, Saul’s blasphemy was pardonable, whereas that of his colleagues was an act of reprobation. Can we really say that the Pharisees of Christ’s day were not “ignorant in unbelief” in the same way Saul was, that they were rejecting a kind of light to which Saul was not exposed, in spite of the testimony and message of Stephen, which Saul witnessed (Acts 7)? This distinction begins to look much too fine to qualify as the difference between pardonable and unpardonable.

Those who prefer the biblical-theological approach do not interpret the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as part of the doctrine of reprobation, but here too are a variety of conclusions. M. R. DeHaan distinguished between (1) the blasphemy against the Spirit, (2) the unpardonable sin (Hebrews 6 and 10), and (3) the sin unto death (1 John 5). But in so doing, he concludes that dispensational theology requires that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit be understood as national Israel’s rejection of their anointed King.¹⁰ This conclusion seems more a movement away from the context of Mark 3 and Matthew 12 than a movement toward it. Defining the unforgivable blasphemy as attributing satanic activity to the exorcism miracles of Christ, Barnard Franklin centered his conclusions on the context of Mark 3, but he said little about Matthew 12.¹¹ As a result, the uniqueness of the event described in these passages is overemphasized to the point that the sin is seen to have no relevance to people today. According to this view, because we are no longer witnesses of the miraculous ministry of Christ on earth, we no longer have opportunity to attribute these miracles to Satan, and so the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not a warning we have to be concerned about today.¹²

These interpretations have two mistakes in common. First, none of these adequately incorporate the truth of the larger context of Matthew 12 when they create three categories of respondents to the testimony of God (believers, forgivable unbelievers, and unforgivable unbelievers), because the key theme of Matthew's presentation is that there are only two categories of respondents – those with Him and those against Him (v. 30). These interpretations see three categories to account for the difference between those who blaspheme Christ and those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. Yet verse 30, which was given to help us understand the blasphemy teaching, emphasizes that one is either with the Lord or against Him, either gathering or scattering. Verses 33-37 speak only of good and bad trees. There are not three kinds of trees – one good kind and two bad kinds. The existence of only two categories of respondents to the ministry of Christ is a key emphasis of His teaching in the context of Matthew 12. To hear a third category of respondents in what He is saying—those whose blasphemy is less serious because it is against the Son but not the Spirit—is to miss His point throughout the passage.

Christ did not intend for us to distinguish between those who are moderate rejecters and those who are extreme rejecters when He mentioned the blasphemy against the Spirit separately from the Son. Rather, this dichotomy is better accounted for as a comment separating future blasphemy (against the Spirit's testimony) from present blasphemy (against the Son's testimony). The warnings and conditional statements of Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-29 are filled with a future focus. To reject Christ presently could be forgiven, but to reject the Holy Spirit in the future would someday carry the consequence of no pardon, because His work would span a coming era in which He would convict the world of sin as its final hope of saving revelation before the day of judgment (Matt. 12:36-37, John 16:8). So, the malevolent nature of both the blasphemy of the Son and the blasphemy of the Spirit categorizes a sinner as a bad tree. And yet where it is leveled against the Son's testimony, it is forgivable

because it is not final. The Spirit's testimony is still coming and may yet be believed. However, where this blasphemy is leveled against the testimony of the coming Spirit, it is unforgivable because it is final.

Second, these interpretations typically view blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as an event rather than a heart condition. The Scripture, however, emphasizes a heart condition when it speaks of blasphemy against God's Son and Spirit. Mark did not comment, "Because they said," but rather "Because they were saying."¹³ A heart condition is being described here. In Matthew 12 Christ explains that the point is not really what was said, but rather what was the heart of the person saying it (v. 34). The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not saying the wrong thing; it is being the wrong thing. It is the fruit of a bad tree. Even Luke speaks not of the act of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, but rather he uses a participle to speak of a blasphemer of the Holy Spirit (12:10). The emphasis in this sin is the heart condition, not an episodic act. The problem is not the production of a piece of bad fruit, but more significantly the malevolent nature of the tree itself.

Understanding the foundation of this doctrine as two separate categories of the condition of the heart leads to some important conclusions. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the condition of the heart of a sinner that is rejecting the Spirit's ministry of convicting the world of sin. This heart condition is unforgivable.

Although it is true that Jesus distinguished between two forms of blasphemy, that against Himself as forgivable and that against the Spirit as unforgivable, this difference is not to be found in the nature of the blasphemy in question, but in the timing of the sinner's heart condition. Jesus taught that the Spirit's testimony would come after His own as God's final call of grace to sinners prior to the coming day of judgment. Many who blasphemed and even crucified the Son were ultimately forgiven, because they heeded the Spirit's testimony, which began at Pentecost. Today, to blaspheme the Spirit's testimony is to reject the sinner's final chance to be convicted of his sin that he might turn to Christ for

salvation. Simply put, to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is to respond to the gospel in unbelief in the age of Pentecost's witness. The unbelieving heart condition involved in this rejection is forever unforgivable, the one eternal sin.

Endnotes

¹ A. T. Robertson describes the day: "This 'Busy Day' is just one of many such days in the Master's ministry....Observe Jesus in the forenoon teaching a crowded audience (Mark 3:19), some of whom insult and blaspheme him, and others demand a sign, and at length his mother and brethren try to carry him off as insane (comp. Mark 3:21); in the afternoon giving a group of most remarkable parables, several of which he interprets; towards night crossing the Lake in a boat, so tired and worn that he sleeps soundly amid the alarming storm; then healing the Gadarene demoniacs, and returning by boat, apparently the same evening. What a day of toil and trial." *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 61.

² D. Edmond Hiebert notes that this is "the first occurrence in Mark of this solemn formula of affirmation." *A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 93.

³ So also D. A. Carson, "*dia touto* (lit. "on account of this")—ties the statements about blasphemy against the Spirit (v. 31) to the preceding verse." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 8, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 290-291.

⁴ Good trees bare good fruit, and bad trees bad fruit. The point of this illustration is applied very pointedly to his accusers, "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. . . . For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

⁵ Carson, for example, says, "This provides a clue for understanding how the unforgivable sin of which Jesus here speaks compares with the sins referred to in Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-31; and possibly 1 John 5:16. In each instance there is self-conscious perception of where the truth lies and the light shines—and a willful turning away from it." *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶ Rice saw four components related to the unpardonable sin: (1) Christ-rejection, (2) rejection of great light and long mercy, (3) rejection of the Holy Spirit's call, and (4) the climax of other sins. See John R. Rice, *Crossing the Deadline! The Unpardonable Sin: What It Is, Who Commits It, How to Know It* (Wheaton, IL: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1953), 18-22.

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 16, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Volume Second*, trans. William Pringle (Reprint, Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 77.

⁸ Carson, 292.

⁹ He claims two things are required to commit the sin, "First, close contact with the glory which is manifest in Christ or his people. Second, not mere contempt of that glory, but the declaration that the Spirit which manifests itself in that glory, which is the Holy Spirit, is a manifestation of Satan." Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1941), 611-612.

¹⁰ "However, we believe that the Sin against the Holy Ghost was a particular national and dispensational sin of rejecting the offer of the Kingdom by Jesus Christ to His covenant people, with the result that they will not be forgiven and restored as a nation until after the age of Law and the present age of grace have run their course." M. R. DeHaan, *The Unpardonable Sin: A Study of the Bible Teaching About the Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost, the Sin Unto Death and the Unpardonable Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: n.p., n.d.), 8.

¹¹ “In other words, they said Jesus had Satan in Him; that He was Satan incarnate instead of God incarnate. It is this, and nothing else, that our Lord calls the blasphemy of the Holy Ghost. Scripture leaves no doubt about it. In Mark 3:30, we are told that it was ‘Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit.’” Barnard Franklin, “The Blasphemy Against the Holy Ghost: An Inquiry into the Scriptural Teaching Regarding the Unpardonable Sin,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (April-June, 1936), 227.

¹² *Ibid.*, 232-233. Note that whereas this position holds that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit can no longer be committed today, the position articulated by this paper concludes that the blasphemy of the Son can no longer be committed today because His in-person testimony is no longer with us.

¹³ “The tense [imperfect] indicates that it was not so much a single act as an attitude of heart which persisted in rejecting the light by calling good evil and evil good. In such a state, the Holy Spirit can no longer work to produce conviction of sin.” Hiebert, 94.