

Blaspheme the Holy Spirit

Scripture: Matthew 12

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Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come. (12:31–32)

Few passages of Scripture have been more misinterpreted and misunderstood than these two verses. Because of their extreme seriousness and finality; it is critical to understand them correctly.

Jesus first stated that **any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men**. Although **blasphemy** is a form of **sin**, in this passage and context the two are treated separately-with blasphemy representing the most extreme form of sin. **Sin** here represents the full gamut of immoral and ungodly thoughts and actions, whereas blasphemy represents conscious denouncing and rejection of God. **Blasphemy** is defiant irreverence, the uniquely terrible sin of intentionally and openly speaking evil against holy God or defaming or mocking Him (cf. Mark. 2:7). The Old Testament penalty for such blasphemy was death by stoning (Lev. 24:16). In the last days blasphemy will be an outstanding characteristic of those who rebelliously and insolently oppose God (Rev. 13:5–6; 16:9; 17:3).

But even **blasphemy**, Jesus says, is **forgiven**, just as any other sin is forgiven when it is confessed and repented of. An unbeliever who blasphemes God can be forgiven. Paul confessed that, “even though [he] was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor,” he was nevertheless “shown mercy, because [he] acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:13–14). “Christ Jesus came into the world,” the apostle continues, “to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (v. 15). Peter blasphemed Christ with curses (Mark 14:71) and was forgiven and restored.

Even a believer can blaspheme, since any thought or word that sullies or defames the Lord’s name constitutes blasphemy. To question God’s goodness, wisdom, fairness, truthfulness, love, or faithfulness is a form of blasphemy. All of that is forgivable by grace. Speaking to believers, John said, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

There is one exception, however: **blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.** Even the person who blasphemes Jesus, who dares **to speak a word against the Son of Man ... shall be forgiven.** **Son of Man** designates the Lord's humanity, which He experienced in His time of humiliation and servitude during the incarnation. A person's perception may not allow him to see more than the Lord's humanity, and if he only misjudges at that level and speaks against Him in His humanness, such a **word against the Son of Man** can **be forgiven.** When a person rejects Christ with less than full exposure to the evidence of His deity, he may yet be forgiven of that sin if, after gaining fuller light, he then believes.

It was hard even for the disciples to keep clearly in mind that their Teacher was indeed the Son of God. He ate, drank, slept, and became tired just as they did. Not only that, but many of the things He did simply did not seem to reflect God's glory and majesty. Jesus continually humbled Himself and served others. He took no earthly glory for Himself, and when others tried to thrust it on Him, He refused to receive it-as when the crowd wanted to make Him king after He miraculously fed the five thousand (John 6:15). It was even more difficult for those outside Jesus' inner circle to appreciate His deity. Even when He performed His greatest miracles, He did so without fanfare or flare. Jesus did not always look or act like even a human lord, much less like the divine Lord.

But to misjudge, belittle, and discredit Jesus from the vantage point of incomplete revelation or inadequate perception was forgivable, wrong as it was. As already mentioned, the apostle Paul had himself been an ignorant blasphemer of the Lord Jesus Christ of the worst sort and a fierce persecutor of His church. And many of those who had denied and rejected Christ during His earthly ministry later saw the truth of who He was and asked forgiveness and were saved.

But **the blasphemy against the Spirit** was something more serious and irremediable. It not only reflected unbelief, but determined unbelief-the refusal, after having seen all the evidence necessary to complete understanding, even to consider believing in Christ. This was **blasphemy** against Jesus in His deity, **against the Spirit** of God who uniquely indwelt and empowered Him. It reflected determined rejection of Jesus as the Messiah against every evidence and argument. It reflected seeing the truth incarnate and then knowingly rejecting Him and condemning Him. It demonstrated an absolute and permanent refusal to believe, which resulted in loss of opportunity *ever* to **be forgiven ... either in this age, or in the age to come.** Through this age (all of human history), such rejection is unforgivable. **The age to come** implies that through all of eternity there will be no forgiveness. In the age of human history and in the age of divine consummation, no forgiveness.

Scripture is clear that during His ministry on earth our Lord was submissive to the Father (John 4:34; 5:19–30) and empowered by the Spirit (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1, 18; John 3:34; Acts 1:2; Rom. 1:4). Peter said that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth “with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

Those who spoke against the **Holy Spirit** were those who saw His divine power working in and through Jesus but willfully refused to accept the implications of that revelation and, in some cases, attributed that power to Satan. Many people had heard Jesus teach and preach God’s truth, as no man had ever taught before (Matt. 7:28–29), yet they refused to believe Him. They had seen him heal every kind of disease, cast out every kind of demon, and forgive every kind of sin, yet they charged Him with deceit, falsehood, and demonism. In the face of every possible evidence of Jesus’ messiahship and deity, they said no. God could do nothing more for them, and they would therefore remain eternally unforgiven.

For penitence they substitute hardening, for confession plotting. Thus, by means of their own criminal and completely inexcusable callousness, they are dooming themselves. Their sin is unpardonable because they are unwilling to tread the path that leads to pardon. For a thief, an adulterer, and a murderer there is hope. The message of the gospel may cause him to cry out, “O God be merciful to me, the sinner.” But when a man has become hardened, so that he has made up his mind not to pay any attention to the ... Spirit, ... he has placed himself on the road that leads to perdition. (William Hendriksen, *The Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 529)

Through Isaiah, the Lord pictured Israel as a vineyard He had carefully planted, cultivated, and tended. He built a tower in the middle of it, representing Jerusalem, and a wine vat in it, representing the sacrificial system. “Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones.” “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” God asked. “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. And I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it” (Isa. 5:1–6). After the people had been blessed with every blessing and had every opportunity but still turned their backs on God, there was nothing left for Him to do but turn His back on them.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, the unbelieving Pharisees and all the others who blasphemed **the Spirit** cut themselves off from God’s mercy, not because it was not offered but because it was abundantly offered yet rebelliously and permanently rejected and ridiculed as satanic.

Within forty years, God would destroy Jerusalem, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the nation of Israel. In 70 A.D. the Romans razed Jerusalem, utterly destroyed the Temple, slaughtered over a million of its inhabitants, and all but obliterated nearly a thousand other towns and villages in Judea. His own chosen people had said no to Him, and He said no to them. Until He returns and regathers a remnant of His people to Himself in the last days, except for a few faithful, they are as a nation totally apart from God.

To unsaved Jews who had heard the full gospel message and had seen its evidence in supernatural power, and to all who would come after them with similar exposure to the truth and the biblical record of miraculous evidence, the writer of the book of Hebrews gave a stern warning: “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard [that is, the apostles], God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb. 2:3–4). Later in the letter an even more severe warning to those who reject with full revelation is given: “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame” (Heb. 6:4–6). (For a detailed discussion of that important passage, see the author’s commentary in this series on Hebrews.)

The generation immediately after Christ was on earth was ministered to by the apostles, enlightened by their teaching, and given proof of the truth of the gospel by their miracles. That generation had evidence equivalent to that of those who heard and saw Jesus in person. They had the highest possible revelation from God, and if they refused to believe in the face of such overwhelming evidence, there was nothing more God could do for them. They did not blaspheme; they simply turned away. The guilt of the Pharisees who added blasphemy to unbelief was greater than that of those who saw the same evidence and disbelieved but did not **speak against the Holy Spirit**. But the rebels in both groups left themselves no future but hell.

In a similar way, people today can so totally turn their backs on God’s revelation that they permanently cut themselves off from salvation. “We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day,” Jesus said; “night is coming, when no man can work” (John 9:4).

During World War II, an American naval force in the North Atlantic was engaged in heavy battle with enemy ships and submarines on an exceptionally dark night. Six planes took off from the carrier to search out those targets, but while they were in the air a total blackout was ordered for the carrier in order to protect it from attack. Without lights on the carrier's deck the six planes could not possibly land, and they made a radio request for the lights to be turned on just long enough for them to come in. But because the entire carrier, with its several thousand men as well as all the other planes and equipment, would have been put in jeopardy, no lights were permitted. When the six planes ran out of fuel, they had to ditch in the freezing water and all crew members perished into eternity.

There comes a time when God turns out the lights, when further opportunity for salvation is forever lost. That is why Paul told the Corinthians, "Now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation' " (2 Cor. 6:2). One who rejects full light can have no more light-and no forgiveness.

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