

Matthew 12:31-32

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Jesus gives the Pharisees a very serious warning. Anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven.

The parallel gospel accounts of this teaching are found in Mark 3:28-30 and Luke 12:10.

Jesus gives the Pharisees a serious warning. It is possibly the most severe warning He gives anyone. It is a *whoever* warning, which means the warning is not just to the Pharisees but to everyone.

Jesus begins the warning with *Therefore* indicating that what He is about to tell them is drawn from the context of the Pharisees' accusation that He was using demonic powers to cast out demons and the truths of the two proverbs He just spoke. He also says *I say to you*, to emphasize that He is speaking from His own divine authority. Because He is God, Jesus has no need to appeal to the teachings and traditions of learned scholars or great men.

Jesus says *any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people*. To *sin* is to miss the mark. In a moral context *sin* means failing to miss God's moral standard. Romans 3:23 states the tragic fact that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." *Blasphemy* was a serious offense in Jesus's day. The word is a transliteration of the Greek "Blasphemia." The word's literal meaning is to slander or speak harm. More broadly, *blasphemy* referred to words, actions, attitudes that profane something that is sacred. The most serious charge of *blasphemy* was to blatantly disrespect or mock God. The Jewish concept of *blasphemy* and its seriousness comes from Leviticus:

"Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him. The stranger as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death." (Leviticus 24:16)

What Jesus likely means by His statement, *any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people* is that there is no *sin* (however horrible, appalling, or despised), or *blasphemy* (however shocking, rude, or defiant) that is unforgiveable. Every *sin and blasphemy can be forgiven*. Indeed, anyone who trusts in Jesus *shall* have all his sins and blasphemies *forgiven*. Heaven and its kingdom will be populated by *people* who have committed all manner of sin and *blasphemy*, but who have had their *sin and blasphemy forgiven* by God's amazing mercy. This is a tremendous comfort to *whoever* has sinned *against* or blasphemed God.

But His comfort is swiftly followed by a severe warning: *But blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven*. He elaborates for clarity and emphasis. *Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him*. He adds, *either in this age or in the age to come*.

What does Jesus mean by this stern statement?

The most straightforward interpretation of this warning is that *any* and all sins and blasphemies *shall be forgiven* with the exception of *blasphemy against the Spirit*. This type of *blasphemy shall not be forgiven* here on earth *in this age*. And it *shall not be forgiven in the age to come* at the Judgement Seat. It is the unforgiveable offense.

What then is *blasphemy of the Holy Spirit*?

Jesus describes *blasphemy of the Holy Spirit* as *whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit*. He compares this offense with a similar *blasphemy*: *whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man*. *The Son of Man* is one of Jesus's coy expressions to refer to Himself as the Messiah. *The Son of Man* was used as a generic term in Jesus's day for "someone," but it was also considered a Messianic term used by Daniel (Daniel 7:13-14). Jesus distinguishes and seems to contrast the severity between speaking *against the Son of Man* (the Messiah) from speaking *against the Holy Spirit*. Jesus says *whoever speaks a word against the Messiah, shall be forgiven* but that *whoever blasphemes the Holy Spirit by speaking against God shall not be forgiven*.

He says this perhaps because some who initially rejected Jesus as the Messiah and participated in His murder would later repent of their crime and *be forgiven*. It is likely that many of those who were among the crowd speaking *against the Son of Man*, shouting for Pilate to hand over Barabbas and condemn Jesus (Matthew 27:15-26, Mark 15:6-15, Luke 23:17-22, John 18:38-40) were also among those who received Peter and the Apostles' message at Pentecost fifty days later (Acts 2:14-41). Peter told that crowd, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). At that statement, the crowd was "pierced to the heart" and asked Peter what they should do (Acts 2:37). Peter told them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38), and he exhorted them to "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40). Luke, the author of Acts, then reports "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). Thus, the Bible shows that at least some of the whosoever that *speaks a word against the Son of Man* were, in fact, *forgiven*.

Why then *shall* those who *speak against the Holy Spirit not be forgiven* when at least some of those who *speak against the Son of Man* are *forgiven*?

This may be a matter that we are unable to answer and we should simply leave it to God. But the Bible does, at least, provide some light for us to follow.

It might simply be that *blasphemy against the Spirit* is refusing to believe the truth when the Spirit reveals it to us. This would be as opposed to any decision we might make apart from the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees saw what was undeniably true, and rejected it. The truth was revealed to them, and they chose to believe a lie.

This could have two applications. The first would be for unbelievers. God's witness of Himself is all around us (Romans 1:19-20; 10:18). God reveals Himself to humanity in many ways. The Spirit convicts of sin. But if, like the Pharisees, we openly reject what is being revealed, then we will not be able to believe on Jesus. This will not be forgiven. Every human that has been granted the ability to see and understand sufficiently to believe will be held accountable for that choice.

Every sin can be forgiven, but to refuse to acknowledge the truth, and receive the forgiveness offered by Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is the one sin that cannot, and will not, be forgiven.

There is another sense in which things might not be forgiven, that could apply to believers. In the Lord's Prayer, the primary point of the prayer was that God will forgive His children in the same way His children forgive others. Jesus made this point the primary point of the prayer. This is why, just after the prayer, Jesus offered this explanation: "For if *you* forgive others for their transgressions, *your* heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if *you* do not forgive others, then *your* Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14).

This particular forgiveness relates to fellowship. We can't have intimate fellowship with those against whom we hold a grudge. Jesus tells us in the Lord's Prayer that believers, His children, can't have intimate fellowship with Him when we are holding grudges against other people. That is why Jesus instructed us to pray "Lord, only forgive me the same way I forgive others." It is a stark reminder of the importance of forgiving other people.

In the same way, when we do not follow the Spirit, and instead follow the flesh, we are destined to incur the adverse consequence that comes from following the flesh. That is our choice, and we will have to live with it.

God's wrath often entails receiving what we seek when we go against God's will (only to discover it wasn't what we really wanted). What we hoped would bring pleasure, honor, power, etc. naturally brings pain, slavery, and death. Romans 1:18-32 describes the way God's wrath is typically revealed. After persistently seeking the fake glory of sin, God eventually gives people over to their lusts (Romans 1:24) and they receive "in their own persons the due penalty of their error" (Romans 1:27).

Throughout Scripture, *the Holy Spirit* is God's invisible presence (Psalm 139:7-8) and power on earth (Zechariah 4:6). After Jesus ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit comes to live inside every believer (I Corinthians 6:19), guiding and empowering them to live in righteousness (Psalm 143:10; Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:22-23). This is in fulfillment of what was promised by the prophets (Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 2:28-29) and by Christ (John 14:16-17, 26; John 15:26; John 16:7, Acts 1:4-5, 8).

But perhaps first among *the Holy Spirit's* many roles regarding sinful man is to give God's mercy. One of the ways *the Holy Spirit* gives mercy is as a protective influence that both strives with man's wickedness mitigating the full effects of sin's catastrophic consequences (Genesis 6:3) and by restraining the coming of the man of lawlessness (II Thessalonians 2:6-7). Another way the Holy Spirit gives mercy is by convicting people of their *sin* and unbelief, prompting them to repent, and quickening their hearts towards God's goodness (John 16:7-11).

But *whoever* blasphemes *the Holy Spirit* by rejecting His mercy will receive the terrible thing they seek. They *shall not be forgiven* precisely because they blasphemed *the Holy Spirit's* offer of forgiveness. The natural consequence of refusing to *be forgiven* by *the Spirit* is that you *shall not be forgiven*.

For a non-believer, rejecting the witness of the Holy Spirit will mean eternal separation from God and His infinite goodness. For a believer, it could mean a loss of fellowship, and reward. This life is our only opportunity to know God by faith. The greatest reward of this life is likely the knowledge we gain of knowing God, and others, through a walk of faith. Perhaps a good picture of believers who did not listen to and follow the Spirit are the “sons of the kingdom” Jesus spoke of in Matthew 8 who were in anger and sorrow over missing out on sharing the rewards of the kingdom, because they had lacked faith (Matthew 8:10-13).

This aligns with the general way God’s wrath is most typically revealed, giving people what they asked for (Romans 1:18-32). Unbelievers who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit will get their own way, apart from God. Believers who follow the flesh instead of the Spirit will get the corrupt fruits of the flesh. It also aligns with how the Bible depicts rejecting or grieving the Holy Spirit elsewhere scripture.

In Genesis, the Lord says, “My *Spirit* will not strive with man forever” (Genesis 6:3), prior to unleashing the Flood and cleansing the world of man’s violence.

Isaiah notes that when Israel rebelled against His commands, it grieved the Holy Spirit.

“And the angel of His presence saved them;
In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them,
And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.
But they rebelled
And grieved His Holy Spirit;
Therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy,
He fought against them.”
(Isaiah 63:9-10)

Something like this may also have happened with Pharaoh, who refused to believe God’s message to him despite the wonders he witnessed (and later suffered). After the first five plagues, scripture either states clearly that Pharaoh “hardened his [own] heart” *against the LORD* (Exodus 8:15; Exodus 8:32), or scripture is ambiguous as to who is hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 7:22; Exodus 8:19, Exodus 9:7). After the first five plagues, however, God seems to have given Pharaoh over to his blasphemous perspective. Scripture says that with four of the remaining five plagues that it was God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 9:12; Exodus 10:1, Exodus 10:20; Exodus 10:27; Exodus 11:10). (Of course, God knew how this would unfold, even before it took place (Exodus 3:19-20; Exodus 4:21)!)

One of the consequences of hardening one’s heart against God is God hardening the hardener’s heart against Him even further. The consequence of *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* is not only refusing God’s mercy, but it is additional *blasphemy* which hardens one’s heart *against the Spirit*. This of course leads to destruction, via the consequences God has clearly laid out in scripture. Just as Jesus was laying out truth to the Pharisees, and they would not listen.

Such was the danger the Pharisees were stepping into in order to preserve their power and influence. They had rejected Jesus’s teachings. They had ignored the scriptures testifying who

He was. And now they were denying *the Holy Spirit's* power by which Jesus performed His miracles. They were refusing to recognize that God's kingdom had come upon them. Like Pharaoh, they were denying the palpable power and presence of God in their midst. If they had not done so already, they were on the verge of committing *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*. The result would be that they got their own way, which will lead to their destruction.

Biblical Text

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.