

THE SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

Text: Matthew 12:30-32

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Date: 1st May, 2016

In a previous congregation there was a young man who suffered from schizophrenia. He suffered from mental confusion and hearing voices. One day he came to me very scared. He said 'In my mind I keep blaspheming God. I say terrible things about God and I can't stop. I've got no hope now because I have blasphemed the Holy Spirit'. He was very frightened because he thought he had committed the sin against the Holy Spirit. The last couple of weeks we have been getting to know more about the Holy Spirit. We have noted he is a person not just a force in us. He is gentle and patient, rather than forceful and domineering. So it means we can ignore him and go against his leading. And that can hurt him deeply. As we said last week we can 'grieve the Spirit' with our sinfulness. Now that raises a question: What if we go too far? What if we really hurt him? What if we completely ignore the Spirit and go against him? That's what is behind a question that comes up from time to time. Namely 'What is the sin against the Holy Spirit?' What is it and why is it the sin that will not be forgiven? There is some confusion as to what it means to sin against the Spirit. So let's work out what it is all about. Here in our text (Matthew 12:31&32) Jesus says: *"And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but any one who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."*

To understand why Jesus comes out with this very strong statement, we need to look at the context. Jesus has been having a running battle with the Pharisees. They criticise Jesus (12:2) because his disciples *"picked some heads of grain"* on the Sabbath when they were hungry. Later (12:9-14) Jesus heals *"a man with a shrivelled hand...on the Sabbath"*, which so infuriates the Pharisees that (12:14) *"the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus."* So Jesus withdraws. But lots of people follow him

and he heals their sick (12:15-16ff). One of the persons brought to him (:22) is a *"demon-possessed man who was blind and mute and Jesus healed him...all the people were astonished and said 'Could this be the Son of David."* What we have here is an obvious act of the Spirit of God empowering Jesus. It is an act so marvellous that the astonished folk begin to wonder if Jesus is the promised Messiah. But now look at the reaction of the Pharisees: (:24) *"But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."* Do you see what they are saying? 'This is not done by the power of the Spirit. It is an act of the devil'. Jesus responds basically by saying, 'What you say doesn't make sense, an army that fights amongst itself has already lost'. (25) *"If a kingdom is divided against itself it will be ruined. If Satan drives out Satan he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do you people drive them out?"*

Then in verse 28 Jesus states what the situation actually is. *"But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."* Jesus is that his healing of the demon-possessed man demonstrates he is God. Jesus is the presence of God amongst his people. The kingdom of God is present in Jesus Christ. And the power by which the demons were driven out was the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, coming into the presence of God always demands a response. You either come in faith and repentance. Or you refuse to acknowledge God and to repent. God is not a neutral object to be analysed and talked over. That's why Jesus says in verse 30 *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."* Jesus here sets up a very high view of who he is. He is the awesome judge of all who is gathering his people for eternal life. Everyone is judged on the basis of their response to him. If we come in repentance and faith we are for him and we gather others with him. If we are not for him we are against him. There is no neutral position. The Pharisees might like to think they can stand back and criticise Jesus. Jesus says, not so! The kingdom of God is here. How do you respond? That's how it is every time I preach. Or each time you teach and witness about Jesus. Christ is proclaimed, the kingdom is here and something always happens. If there is a response of faith and repentance there is forgiveness and eternal life. If there is no response of belief, if people think they can be neutral and have a multitude of religious choices in our post-modern world, they remain lost to God. Jesus actually divides. Either we trust him as Lord or we are against him.

Now in this context Jesus says (:31 & 32) "*...blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ... Any one who speaks a word against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.*" What is he saying? The Greek word 'blasphemeo' means 'to slander'. It has been defined as 'defiant irreverence'. So Jesus says the Pharisees slandered the work of the Spirit. What Jesus did in healing the demon possessed man was done in the power of the Holy Spirit. But the Pharisees denounced it as the work of the devil. What was truly good they perversely called evil. They are doing exactly what Isaiah spoke of (Isaiah 5:20) "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.*" Now we need to understand what is happening here. It is not that the Pharisees are slow to see the light. They are not spiritually slow in understanding, like the disciples often were and we often are. Rather, having glimpsed the 'light' they deliberately call it 'darkness'. The healing of the demon possessed man was clearly a great miracle. It was a wonderful work of the Spirit that left the people in awe. But as clear as that was, the Pharisees so hated Jesus and the truth he stood for that they hardened themselves against the truth. Now here is the key issue. There is a hardening of their hearts and no repentance.

Jesus said in verse 31 "*...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men...*" No exceptions are mentioned. Whenever there is genuine repentance there is forgiveness. The reason Jesus says that those who "*...speak a word against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven*" is because it puts you beyond repentance. And if you don't repent you won't be forgiven. So why is it that "*blasphemy against the Spirit*" puts you beyond repentance? It's because of the unique role the Holy Spirit plays in our salvation. Remember it is his unique role to make the 'finishing touches' to the saving work of Jesus. He is the one who applies in our lives what Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection. It is the Spirit's work to give us 'new birth', to open eyes to faith, to lead us to repentance, to apply to our lives all that Jesus has gained for us. So if we see the power of the Spirit and reject his work we cut ourselves off from the only one who can lead us to Jesus and repentance. And thus we cut ourselves off from forgiveness. So the sin against the Holy Spirit can be defined as 'an act of resistance which belittles the Holy Spirit so badly that he withdraws forever his convicting power so we are never able to repent and be forgiven.' "*Blasphemy against the Spirit*" is not just a once off offense. It is an ongoing act of rebellion. It is a stubborn way of life that

continually resists, rejects and insults the Holy Spirit. In Acts 7:51 Stephen says to the Pharisees "*You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit. As did your fathers, so do you.*" So "*Blasphemy against the Spirit*" is where we turn our backs on the voice of the Holy Spirit. We silence his convictions and eventually we cannot hear his convincing power. We cannot respond to his promptings. We can no longer ask for repentance and therefore we cannot be saved.

Now let's clear up a few things. Sin against the Spirit is not about generally blaspheming. As we noted Jesus says in verse 31 "*And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men...*" So if you are guilty of using God's name in a wrong way, like many do in our Aussie culture, it's wrong, but is forgiven where there is repentance. What Jesus says here also applies to sin in general. Jesus does not say that if we sin, or deliberately do wrong, or continually do wrong that it won't be forgiven. Reality is we all fail God, in every way, all the time. If we have the spiritual sensitivity to see it, we realise that. If we are spiritually sensitive we realise we hurt the Spirit within us constantly. A long continual struggle with a certain sin, an addiction to something, may make us wonder if God will forgive us. Jesus says 'Yes he will'. Where there is true repentance and faith there is always grace. The Bible is full of God's bigheartedness. When Peter asked about forgiving a person, and thought seven times was enough Jesus said seventy times seven. In other words it's without limit. It has to be for us! Otherwise none of us has hope.

The wonderful thing to notice is that right in the middle of the verses of our context we see the quote from Isaiah 42, about God's chosen servant (:18ff) "*Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; ...A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.*" Nothing is weaker than a smouldering wick. It's where the flame has gone out and all that is left is the last bit of smoke. All it needs is the slightest puff of wind, and it's gone. But the saviour, says Isaiah, is so gentle with those needing to be saved that he will not snuff out the smouldering wick. The weakest faith: the most faltering discipleship, the most hesitant, doubt-filled following; honest doubt and perplexity; all of these our Lord sees and notes and helps. None of it will he scorn or dismiss. And none of it must we ever suggest to be anything approaching the blasphemy against the Spirit. Weak faith Jesus strengthens. Faltering faith he makes strong. Genuine perplexity he addresses. He doesn't break bruised reeds or quench smouldering wicks.

Jesus has nothing but compassion and help for those who cry that their struggle for faith is just that: a struggle.

We note also that Jesus says in verse 32, "*Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven...*" We remember that after this situation in our text, Jesus went on his way to the cross. There too blasphemy was spoken against him. Remember those who laughed at him and wagged their heads as they went by the cross. Those who guarded him mocked and beat him. Even one of those on a cross next to him, railed at him. But all of this, dreadful as it was, did not bring down God's refusal to forgive. Jesus himself pleaded, "*Father forgive them for they do not know what they do.*" The people of Israel, who had cried out "*Crucify him*", later at Pentecost were invited to experience God's pardon: "*Repent and believe and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*"

So, the sin against the Spirit should not be seen as some specific sin we might fall into, or some mysterious thing we might stumble across, or simply deliberate sin, or blasphemy, or stubbornness per se. The work of the Spirit is to reveal Jesus as Son of God and Saviour. And when we are faced with indisputable evidence by the Spirit, as it was in the healing of the demon possessed man, when we have seen what the gospel is really all about, and have come so close to the kingdom, but still harden our hearts and call it all nonsense, evil, and want nothing to do with it, then we won't be forgiven. Then there is no hope because it is only in Jesus that there is salvation. Deny Jesus and you have condemned yourself to hell. Sin against the Spirit is where a person, in full awareness, knows the gospel, knows what he is doing, and still wilfully and self consciously rejects the work of the Spirit and wants to be away from God.

I may not have answered all questions on this issue. But I trust it's enough to help anyone who is frightened of the possibility of sinning against the Spirit. The likelihood of us 'grieving' the Spirit with our sin is, in all honesty, a constant. But the unforgivable sin against the Spirit is another thing. Anyone who is worried can see in their own fear a proof they have not sinned against the Spirit. For those who do '*blaspheme the Spirit*' do so in full awareness and without feeling guilt. If we are sobered by hearing the words of Jesus this morning it is proof that we are spiritually sensitive. We must always remember that Jesus speaks a severe word for the sake of a kind word. He warns us for the sake of keeping us fixed on the kingdom of God. Jesus warns us so

that instead of slandering the Spirit and growing in hardness, that we grasp again the wonder of the Spirit, God revealing himself in us. It's so that we are sensitive to his promptings and nudges. That we sense the joy as the Spirit reminds us we are indeed God's children. That we experience peace as the Spirit reassures us we are indeed forgiven.

Questions for reflection.

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Why does Jesus say "The person who is not for me is against me"? Why can't we be neutral in relation to how we see Jesus?
- Define what the sin against the Spirit is? Why is blasphemy against the Spirit not forgiven?
- What comfort do you draw from the Isaiah 42 reference "*a smouldering wick he will not snuff out*"?