

What Is the Sin Against the Spirit?

By

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A perennial question for all who speak about the Holy Spirit is that of blasphemy, or sin against the Holy Spirit. The words of Jesus concerning all kinds of transgressions have been picked to pieces in order to identify what is popularly referred to as “the unpardonable sin.” The result is that modern radio preachers have come up with a number

of different “sins” to which this designation is applied. It is obvious they cannot all be correct, and it is possible none of them are. The consistent listener might almost be led to think the unforgivable sin is one’s failure to send a contribution to the preachers.

When Jesus used the expression, “blasphemy against the Spirit,” He did so in contrast with “every sin and blasphemy.” His words were, “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matthew 12:31). Blasphemy is a specific sin against the Spirit as contrasted with every other sin. Integrity in interpretation demands that this fact govern any attempt at exegesis.

A widely-read expositor once took the indefensible position that deliberate murder of a Christian constituted the sin against the Holy Spirit. He reasoned that the body of such a person was the temple of the Holy Spirit. The man made out an elaborate case and arranged a quantity of Scriptures in defense of his position, but several things are wrong with it. Blasphemy has nothing to do with an act of murder. Furthermore, murder can be forgiven, and was, even when perpetrated against the only begotten Son of God. On the cross Jesus prayed for those who were taking His life: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). If their sin was unforgivable, such a prayer would have been a farce. The fact is, the prayer was answered a little more than seven weeks later, on the Day of Pentecost, in the city of Jerusalem. Peter confronted the Jews who were present, saying, “This Jesus, who did many miracles and wonders among you, you crucified and killed through lawless and merciless men” (Acts 2:22, 23). Yet, when those who heard this were stabbed by their consciences and asked what they must do, Peter replied, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). The prayer of Jesus for the forgiveness of His murderers was answered when the sinners complied with the terms of forgiveness as laid down by the Father.

A preacher, who had sought without success to counsel a person of suicidal tendencies, wrote a booklet advancing the idea that suicide was the unpardonable sin. His reasoning was that the sin was premeditated, and in the commission of it the sinner cut off all opportunities for repentance. For that reason he placed himself outside the pale of forgiveness. But this is certainly not the sin about which Jesus was speaking. If suicide is an unpardonable sin, there are two such sins, rather than just one. Suicide is the taking of human life, but the degree of culpability for the act will have to be assessed by God who

knows the hearts of men. Certainly the perpetrator, who is also the victim, cannot be judged by a human tribunal, although men are prone to make posthumous statements about such situations. Only God can know the mental state at the time when one takes his life. There is no ground for saying a person who commits suicide cannot be forgiven. He may be, but if this is so, it will not be because of the impossibility of forgiveness due to the nature of the act.

Perhaps the most common of all the opinions about one's sinning against the Spirit is that it is resistance against the call of the Spirit until death overtakes the sinner. There is a fallacy in this kind of rationalization, however. Certainly the Spirit operates upon the heart of the sinner through the message proclaimed, but there is a difference between resisting and blaspheming. While it is dangerous indeed to reject an appeal to commit one's life to the lordship of Jesus, the sin is not unforgivable, but unforgiven. If it were unforgivable, each person would be afforded but one opportunity to obey the gospel, and if he refused, he could never be forgiven. One who stubbornly persists in rejecting the call of God's grace will die in an unforgiven state because he dies in his sins. But his sins and stubbornness could have been forgiven at any time.

Blasphemy against the Spirit is not forgivable. It is unique, and its uniqueness lies in its nature and the object of the blasphemy. Why, then, do men ascribe so many and divergent actions to it? The answer is simple. They lift a statement out of its setting and, by isolating it from its Scriptural background, they can arbitrarily make it mean anything that seems rational to themselves. This is responsible for most of the misunderstanding in the religious realm.

None of the words of Jesus were spoken in a vacuum. None of His acts were performed by accident. Every passage of Scripture was originally given in a three-fold context of time (history), place (geography), and revelation. To ignore this context is to handle the Word of God unfairly and to reach unwarranted and unjustifiable conclusions. Let us consider what has become a thorny problem in exegesis from the Scriptural framework in which it appears.

At the time Jesus made the statement regarding the sin against the Holy Spirit, He was at the peak of His acclaim by the masses. "A great multitude from Galilee followed him, and from Judaea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things he did, came unto him" (Mark 3:7, 8; KJV). He told the disciples to keep a boat ready, to prevent His being crushed by the crowd. The record says, "For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues" (v. 10). Mark especially refers to the fact that when He confronted those who were possessed by demons, the evil spirits would fall at His feet and cry aloud, "You are the Son of God." All of this had a profound impact upon the common people and they refused to be dismissed. They surged around Jesus, wondering about and discussing His claims. When Jesus entered a house, the crowd pressed in until it was impossible for the disciples to eat. To add to the general excitement, a rumor was conveyed to Nazareth that Jesus had lost His mental faculties and was acting like a crazed person. "When his friends heard of it,

they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself” (v. 21).

Among the more interested observers of this growing influence were the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their motives for trying to check it were different, however. The Sadducees were political opportunists, compromising with Rome and seeking to curb any movement that might develop into a revolution. Such would bring down swift punishment by the Roman legions, with a consequent loss of official positions, which were always tenuous in an occupied territory.

The Pharisees were the watchdogs of orthodoxy. Their concern was that the rabble (as they regarded the people) should not be led away from the body of rabbinical tradition by which their every move in life was regulated. Jesus was attached to no sect. He was neither Pharisee, Sadducee, nor Essene. He was not a product of any rabbinical school. He was from Nazareth, a despicable city away from the great centers of learning and culture. As the Pharisees saw Him, He was a mere carpenter, a descendant of peasant stock, and a rabble-rousing miracle worker. Their chief concern was to keep Him from securing too large a following. They were willing to go to any lengths to do this. They knew the superstition and fears of the masses. Many of these no doubt resulted from an unwholesome mixture of Chaldean and Persian ideas (acquired during the exile) and legendary traditions of the rabbis.

It would hardly serve our immediate purpose to detail the often absurd fears of the people in the days of our Lord upon the earth. The *Shedim*, or evil spirits, lurked ever near, occupying the atmosphere, awaiting the moment to plague the unfaithful and forgetful. Whether the term *Shedim* is from a primitive root meaning “to fly about” or “to rebel” is now a question, but in those days men were never free from the concern that an evil spirit might move in upon them at any moment. The rabbis cautioned against certain things considered to be especially dangerous because of demons. It was unwise to walk between two palm trees growing more than six feet apart. It was improvident to borrow drinking water from a passerby, or to walk over water that had been poured out, or spilled upon the ground. The last danger could be averted by sprinkling dust upon the earth, or removing one’s shoes and walking through barefoot.

Now we must give attention to another word with which our analysis must reckon: *Beelzebul*. There is no doubt that this is the correct term, rather than *Beelzebub*, for every passage of the New Covenant Scriptures in which it appears. It is probable that early translators sought to accommodate it to the Philistine term for the god of flies. Because of a somewhat kindred word in Hebrew, which means “to fertilize land with dung,” some scholars have assumed that Beelzebul was “lord of dung,” or, ruler of the unclean. Alfred Edersheim, the Jewish scholar, has pointed out that Zibbul actually means sacrificing to idols. Beelzebul would therefore be the same as lord or chief of idolatrous sacrificing, the worst and chief of all demons, presiding over and inciting to idolatry. Idolatry was specifically forbidden by the first two Commandments of the Decalogue. To seduce to idolatry or false worship was regarded as the ultimate in disrespect for God. To accuse one of operating by the authority or under the power of Beelzebul was to league him with the very spirit of malevolence, as opposed to all righteousness and moral goodness.

With this bit of background of the circumstances under which Jesus operated, we are ready to investigate the events that called forth His denunciation of those who blasphemed against the Holy Spirit. For the purpose of bringing consistency into the interpretation, enabling one to check the Scriptural language, the discussion will be limited mainly to the language of the *Revised Standard Version*. Other renderings are used, if they make for greater clarity.

The argument is centered primarily around the accounts found in Matthew 12:22-32 and Mark 3:22-30. I am assuming that these two passages cover the same incident and speech. Those who disagree will grant that my dealing with the text itself, which is the present concern, will be fair.

The incident began when a blind and dumb demonic was brought to Jesus. Jesus healed the man in the presence of the people, who attested that the demoniac both spoke and saw. This kind of sign could not be denied, and it created astonishment in the hearts of the beholders. In their amazement they began to ask one another, “Can this be the Son of David?” (Matthew 12:23). Because of this, the Pharisees, jealous for themselves and the law, said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (v. 24). They could not deny that a miracle had occurred, but they could belittle it. It is obvious that they were not true to their own convictions, but spoke these words to keep the superstitious people from following Jesus. One of their own number, who was a ruler among them, had come to Jesus after dark, and confessed, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him” (John 3:2). The Pharisees knew that Jesus was not in league with the prince of demons. This was a ruse intended to counteract the influence of the Son of God with the common people.

Jesus demonstrated the absurdity of their accusation by three arguments. The first showed the folly of a power that would be antagonistic against itself. He said, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand; and if Satan casts out Satan he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:25, 26). One can but imagine the chagrin of the lawyers when this fallacy was pointed out to them publicly.

The second argument dealt with the inconsistency manifested in claiming that Jesus operated under the authority of Beelzebul in expelling demons, while students of the Pharisaic school also claimed to cast them out. The word “sons” here is employed for disciples or students. For example, the “sons” of the prophets were students of the prophets, who sought to learn from and imitate them.

In Judaism of that day, many teachings existed about the exorcising of evil spirits. Many persons believed that pronunciation of the “ineffable name” of God would drive demons forth, and there were various combinations of terms to be recited to put the *Shedim* to flight. Jesus did not enter into a debate as to the legitimacy of the claims of the disciples of the Pharisees. It was the contention of the Pharisees that their students could drive out demons, so the question was, if it required authority from the prince of demons

to do so, were they operating in league with demons also. Jesus said, “They shall be your judges” (v. 27).

On the other hand, to admit that the Spirit of God drove out the demons was to admit that the kingdom of God had come upon them. The Jews believed a kingdom of darkness was presided over by the prince of demons. If Jesus had been operating under the authority of that prince, the kingdom of darkness was predominant, but if He manifested the Spirit of God, the rule of Heaven was triumphing over Satan, laying his kingdom waste.

The third argument had to do with the relative strength required to subdue a man before plundering his house and dispossessing him. “Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house” (v. 29). In this example the strong man is Satan. His goods are represented by the demons infesting the bodies of unfortunate victims, such as the one who had been afflicted by blindness and loss of speech. The argument of Jesus is clear. Before He could cast out demons He would have needed to subdue Satan and gain control of his holdings and property. Satan would no more surrender his stronghold than a man would willingly let a marauder come upon his premises and throw his possessions into the street. The observers’ admission that Jesus was driving out demons was also an admission that He had gained superiority over Satan.

These arguments presented a real dilemma to the Pharisees. If Jesus operated under the power of Beelzebul, Satan was fighting against his own forces and his kingdom would disintegrate. If not, Jesus had entered in, bound Satan, and was despoiling his kingdom. The kingdom of Satan was doomed and the superiority of Jesus was admitted, regardless of which position His opposers assumed.

At this point, Jesus inserted a rather peculiar statement, according to Matthew. Its relevance is not seen at first glance. Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (v. 30). A little thought will reveal that He was pointing out that there are but two kingdoms in the universe, by nature hostile toward each other. There was no cessation of warfare between them and no compromise. The Son of God and the son of perdition had nothing in common. There was no concord between Christ and Belial, as Paul phrases it in 2 Corinthians 6:15. Jesus had nothing to do with demons, or with the prince of demons, except to defeat their every intent and purpose.

We are now ready for the statement relating to the sin of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says 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” (Matthew 12:31, 32).

Without speaking it is impossible to commit the sin of blasphemy. Blasphemy is a sin of the tongue and not merely of the heart. Regardless of how wrong one may be in his

thinking, blasphemy must be openly expressed. Our word “blasphemy” is not a translation. It is a transliteration of the Greek original which means “to speak reproachfully, to slander, calumniate, rail at, or revile.” To blaspheme is to speak injuriously of that which is high or holy. Blasphemy is never justifiable, but it is forgivable upon proper repentance when directed against any other person or thing than the Holy Spirit. This is so, even if it involved Jesus. “Whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven” (v. 32).

What is the unforgivable sin? According to the context, it is accrediting to Satan the power by which Jesus performed His wonderful works. It is saying that Jesus possessed an evil spirit rather than the Holy Spirit. This is made quite clear by Mark, who writes that Jesus uttered His warning about blasphemy against the Spirit, “For they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (Mark 3:30). There may be more to the matter than a mere statement, however, for the motivation must not be forgotten.

If those who saw Jesus perform His wonderful works had actually believed, sincerely, that He was using the power of Satan to dislodge demons, they would not have been guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Their verbal conclusion would not have constituted this sin. They would have been sadly mistaken and the conclusion would have been irrational; yet, with increasing knowledge they could have changed their minds and obtained forgiveness for their error.

The blasphemy against the Spirit is to deliberately attribute to Satan the power by which Jesus performed His miracles, against all evidence and for the purpose of deflecting the hearts of humble men and women from faith in Him. The utterance of the slander is simply the result of a malevolent heart conspiring to defeat the very purpose for which Jesus came in the flesh. It is a willful decision to scatter what He has come to gather, and the statement is a lie born of the will to deceive. This raises several questions. Why is this unprincipled calumny of the Spirit so heinous? What places it in a category by itself as the only sin for which forgiveness is not provided? Why is it worse than every other sin and blasphemy, including speaking against the Son of man? A little reflection on the purpose of the Spirit in producing the miracles of Jesus may help to explain the matter.

In general, Jesus performed two kinds of works--intellectual and physical--to excite wonder and to produce faith in Him as the Messiah. The first consisted of predictions as to the future, and faith in this case was deferred until the event came to pass. When an occurrence transpired and the mind recalled that Jesus had previously predicted it exactly as it happened, faith was kindled in His claim to have divine prescience. “I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he” (John 13:19).

Physical miracles were of the kind to incite immediate recognition of supernatural power. Thus the statement, “And when they saw these things, they believed” expresses the idea that the validation of the act was in its nature. It was visual, and the impact was immediate. Physical miracles had a two-fold motivation, resulting from compassion for the suffering and the need for a criterion by which to establish the divinity of a mission.

The relief of physical pain or infirmity was intended to provide an incentive to believe. Belief in Jesus was not a mere exercise of consciousness, but a matter of life and death. He said to the Jews, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he'" (8:24). Jesus also appealed to His works as visual testimony to occasion faith: "But the testimony which I have is greater than that of

John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me'" (5:36). Again, "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father'" (10:37, 38).

John 20:30, 31 is pregnant with meaning: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." It is evident that the Spirit exercised selectivity in placing on record the various miracles of which we may read. Out of the great number of signs Jesus did, a sufficient number were selected to convince any honest heart that He was the Messiah and God's Son. A dishonest heart would not believe in Him regardless of the amount of proof produced.

The signs Jesus did by the Holy Spirit were designed to make believers in Him. A deliberate attempt to frustrate faith by false accusations as to the source of power would therefore be a sin of the deepest dye. It would amount to a malicious conspiracy to deprive men of eternal life because of personal jealousy and hostility. One might honestly question the claims of Jesus, and might verbalize doubts about the authenticity and genuineness of Jesus' words as recorded. This is not unforgivable. Further research and study could well demonstrate one's error and bring about real reformation. To behold the signs done to produce faith, and against all observation, knowledge, and conscience, assign that power to Satan for the specific purpose of destroying faith is to condemn mankind once and for all to eternal death.

Why is there no forgiveness for this malign act? The simplest answer is that God has placed it outside the pale of divine forgiveness. It is beyond the limit set for grace. It is the one crime against divine majesty that is outside the circle. This does not exhaust the subject, however. The kind of heart that would engage in such reprehensible conduct will not repent. It is the heart of stone or flint that would willingly see the world of mankind destroyed to justify its own cruelty and gratify its own inhumanity.

The question always arises, "What if one in this condition should repent?" This need not trouble us. One who is dead to love for all truth, and has crucified in his consciousness all respect for evidence will not believe. Faith is the belief of testimony, and one who has examined the testimony and defiantly assigned it to the realm of the damned has no ground left for honest faith. He has sinned away his day of grace!

Can men commit the unpardonable sin today? The answer, I think, is that it is

possible, but not very probable. That it is possible can be deduced from the words of Jesus, “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). Among the Jews who were present when these words were spoken, the expression “the age to come,” referred to the Messianic age, the time when, according to their thinking, the Messiah would sit upon His throne and exercise universal dominion. There is no reason to believe that Jesus employed the term in any other than the accepted sense, just as there is no reason to think that He endorsed the traditional ideas with which the rabbis had invested it.

“This age” refers to the dispensation in which Jesus lived upon the earth. “The age to come” refers to the dispensation in which we now live. There would be little value in applying this latter expression to the age following the general resurrection from the dead, for no unforgiven sins will be forgiven then. It is my conviction that one can commit the sin in this age and if so, it is as unforgivable now as it was when Jesus said it. We should not allow the matter to rest here without making a few comments about an attempted current application of the remarks of Jesus. In our own time an interest has been aroused in the work of the Holy Spirit, with the result that many persons claim to have received special gifts of the Spirit, to enable them to perform signs and wonders. Radio stations specializing in “gospel broadcasting” have one program after another, from sunrise to sunset, in which men use their alleged gifts as drawing-cards to solicit contributions and plead for offerings to keep them on the air.

A frequent tactic with which to ward off any criticism and to stifle any protest is to threaten that those who question the sincerity of the speakers may be guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. There is no attempt here to enter into the controversy as to whether or not the “charismatic gifts” are for this generation. That is a study that lies outside the scope of the volume. Honest doubts about the qualifications, objectives, and character of some of the “radio evangelists” is not sinning against the Spirit. By no stretch of the imagination can honest investigation of their claims be remotely connected to what Jesus said.

During my lifetime I have found certain individuals who were deeply troubled by the thought that they might have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, and were condemned to a state of hopelessness here and of condemnation hereafter. Without fail, I have found that the real trouble was ignorance of what Jesus was talking about. Frequently the problem resulted from misinformation derived from an overzealous exhorter who sought to frighten the person into a public response to his call. A simplistic, but relatively safe, criterion is that anyone who is worried about having blasphemed the Spirit has not done so, for the kind of person Jesus described would never worry about it. I have canvassed rather extensively what I regard as the Scriptural teaching related to the blasphemy against the Spirit. It seems apparent that the sin does not refer to an attitude toward a mere influence, impersonal force or energy, but consists of the slander of a divine personality through which God’s purpose is accomplished in the universe of His creation. Yet, if I stop the discussion here, at least two other passages will go unexplained. Many have equated these with the unforgivable sin of which Jesus spoke. Having written at this length on the theme, it seems injudicious to ignore the other

problem passages, so I will deal with them as peripheral questions, not specifically related to the central concern of this work, and yet deserving of scrutiny and attention.

APOSTASY

The first passage is found in Hebrews 6:4-8 and reads as follows: “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.”

On the basis of the statement of the impossibility of restoring to repentance those who are in the category here described, thousands of persons think of apostasy as the unforgivable sin. Again, the problem lies in ignoring the context. Scriptural context may be either immediate and direct, or remote. The first has to do with the setting adjacent to a statement, either preceding or following it, or both. The remote context has to do with the aim and purpose of a letter or section that governs the relationship of all that appears in the entire frame of reference.

A careful study of the entire Hebrew letter will reveal that it was written to Palestinian Jews, as the title indicates. It was written during a time when the temple was still standing in Jerusalem and the priests were daily ministering within its precincts. The addressees had accepted Jesus as the Messiah but because of the appeal of the pomp and pageantry of the temple ritual, or because of persecution and opposition, were defecting to Judaism and abandoning the faith of the gospel. The whole purpose of this letter was to strengthen them to stand firm, “For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (Hebrews 3:14).

The method of encouragement was to point out that in Christ we have something far better than was found under Moses and in the Old Covenant. The word “better” occurs thirteen times, and in each instance points up the superiority of some feature in Christ over what Judaism had to offer. It must be remembered that the first-century Jewish believer who forgot the Lord and returned to his previous relationship, discounted the value of the blood of Christ. He once again placed his trust in inferior animal sacrifices, the blood of bulls and goats, which could never take away sins (10:4).

There is a difference between one’s “leaving the church” or “going back into the world,” as the phraseology of our day often states it, and one’s going back into dead works from which the conscience has been purified. Modern “drop-outs” frequently affirm that they believe in Jesus as much as they ever did, but, because of the weakness of the flesh, they cannot live up to the responsibility of being a Christian. The letter to the Hebrews was not addressed to individuals like this, but to those who have “spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified and

outraged the Spirit of grace” (10:29).

With this preliminary survey we are prepared to look at the passage under discussion. These Hebrews had once been enlightened, which in this instance refers to the illumination of God’s purpose in Christ. “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4). They had left the moonlight age with its shadows, symbols, and types, and were translated into the sunlight dispensation of reality and fulfillment. The situation was like one’s leaving a storm cellar lighted by a single flickering candle and coming into a house aglow with fluorescent lighting.

The Christians had “tasted the heavenly gift.” The word “taste,” as used in the Scriptures, does not mean simply to sample. The term means to experience or share in something. The “heavenly gift” does not refer to the Spirit, which is expressly mentioned in the following statement. It no doubt has to do with that quality of life gained through reception of the Lord Jesus Christ, Heaven’s greatest gift to humanity.

They had “become partakers of the Holy Spirit.” The promise of God to His people through the prophets was that He would grant them His Spirit to dwell in them. We discussed at length the assurance Jesus gave before His departure from earth that He would send another Helper. Accordingly, those who heard the word of truth, the gospel of salvation, and believed in Jesus, were said to be “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit”

(Ephesians 1:13). Under the legal dispensation of Moses, the Spirit invested certain men with the gift of prophetic utterance, leaving the great body of people without direct association with the Spirit. In the gospel age the Spirit dwells in all who are in Christ, and the Hebrews who had been the first to hear the good news had been so blessed.

They had “tasted the goodness of the word of God.” The gospel, a message of joy and hope, brought comfort to the sick and assurance to the dying. It did not require dead sacrifices nor enjoin the killing of animals. Rather, it emphasized the giving of the body of the believer as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, as a rational and understandable service. The contrast was vividly stated in one verse of the Hebrew letter. “For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:13, 14). The Christians had experienced “the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5).

Again, this refers to the Jewish concept of the Messianic age. The writer to the Hebrews regarded that age as having arrived. The Son of God was sitting at the right hand of the Father. Angels, archangels, authorities, and powers were made subject to Him. God had highly exalted Him and given Him a name above every name. He was made head of the community of the called-out ones. The “age to come” had arrived!

The writer declares that if those who have participated in all of these blessings should now “commit apostasy,” it is impossible to restore them to repentance. The word

rendered “apostasy” is from a term meaning to fall away. It refers to an abandonment of the faith, a denial of the validity of the facts upon which belief is founded, an utter desertion of the truth of the gospel. Such desertion is not the result of ignorance, but is a deliberate step taken with eyes wide open to the truth.

Those who fall away crucify the Son of God afresh and hold Him in contempt. How do they do this? The answer is simple. Jesus was condemned to be crucified because He testified that He was the Messiah. Those who lived upon earth in His day preferred their legalistic ritual with the earthly gifts and animal sacrifices. They considered Jesus a threat to their traditions. Men’s forsaking Him and going back to the shadows of the law was like crucifying Jesus anew and making it appear that His death was empty and useless. Defection from the faith under such circumstances gave the enemies of the cross an excuse for rejoicing and an opportunity for ridicule. It weakened the morale of the saints. The very name of Jesus became the butt of scurrilous remarks and was slandered in the eyes of the heathen populace.

Those who forsook Jesus to return to legalistic bondage were likened to cultivated land. A farm that drinks in the rain and repays the tillage of its fields with fruitful crops is blessed of God because of its abundant yield. Sterile or barren ground, or land that produces only a matted growth of thorns and thistles, is fit only for execration and will be burned over to destroy its noxious growth. This last is an apt picture of those who have received every blessing from Heaven, only to use the strength to disgrace and disparage the cause for which Jesus died.

Apostasy, as serious as it may be, is not the blasphemy against the Spirit. One may fall away without overtly slandering the Spirit. The record does not say that such a person cannot repent, rather that it is impossible for another to lead him to repentance. The reason is understood when we remember that every act is the result of motivation. The apostate has listened to and examined every motive leading to repentance. He has experienced every blessing and benefit accruing from relationship with Christ. When he turns his back upon all of these, no other appeal remains that can restore him. We must retain a clear distinction between an apostate and an ordinary backslider. One may become a drop-out without renouncing Jesus. It is possible to become negligent and to forsake responsibility without denying the validity of the claims of God upon one’s life, or the efficacy of the blood of Christ as a cleansing agent for sin. Expositors need to be careful that they do not discourage those who could resume the yoke of Christ by making it appear that they are in such a state they cannot do so.

THE SIN UNTO DEATH

Another passage that presents some real problems is 1 John 5:16, 17. Here John mentions the “sin unto death.” *The Revised Standard Version* designates it a “mortal” sin. Many persons have concluded that this is the sin against the Holy Spirit, of which Jesus spoke. I do not believe the two are identical, and I shall briefly discuss why I do not.

“If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall

give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death” (KJV). In verse 15 John had given assurance that we will be heard in our petitions to God because of our faith in His Son. John then qualifies this by distinguishing between a “sin unto death” and one not “unto death.” This has occasioned much conjecture upon the part of commentators. Many different views have been expressed. Albert Barnes regarded the “sin unto death” as the unpardonable sin. This view was also shared by Philip Doddridge. A lengthy dissent was registered to their view, however, by Dr. James Macknight in his *Apostolical Epistles*.

Dr. Macknight held that in the early age of Christianity, God punished some men for their sins directly with physical disease or infirmity, and in aggravated cases, with death. His position was that if someone in that age who was possessed of the gift of healing saw one smitten of God and could determine that the punishment of death was not assessed, he could pray for that person and God would honor the gift by granting life to the one so smitten.

There can be little doubt that God punished certain sins with death. This was true in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who conspired together to lie about the amount of money they received for the sale of their property (Acts 5:1-10). It is also true that, because of irregularities in observation of the Lord’s Supper, some at Corinth were smitten with sickness and others suffered death (1 Corinthians 11:30). Here Paul declares that those who eat and drink with the wrong motive, eat and drink punishment to themselves. He added, “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”

Here is the full text of Dr. Macknight’s treatment of the passage under consideration:

“Because it was necessary to the successful propagation of the gospel, that its professors in the first age should be remarkably holy, God so ordered it that the open miscarriages of individuals, were often punished with visible temporal judgments. So Paul told the Corinthians, who had been guilty of great irregularities in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, 1 Corinthians 11:30, ‘For this cause many of you are sick, and some of you are dead.’ These judgments, being public, had no doubt a great influence in restraining the first Corinthians from sin. On the other hand to encourage those to repent who by their sins had brought on themselves mortal diseases, there were in the first age, persons, who being endowed with the gift of healing diseases miraculously, (1 Corinthians 12:9), were moved by the Holy Ghost to heal the sick, who had repented of the sins which had brought on them the diseases under which they were laboring. We may therefore believe, that when John directed *any one*, who saw his brother sinning a sin not unto death, to ask God to give him life, he did not mean any ordinary Christian, but any spiritual man who was endowed with the gift of healing diseases; and that the brother for whom the spiritual man was to ask life, was not every brother who had sinned, but the brother only who had been punished for his sin with some mortal disease, but who having repented of his sin, it was not a sin unto death: and that the life to be asked for

such a brother was not eternal life, but a miraculous recovery from the mortal disease under which he was laboring.[9]

W. E. Vine concurs in the view expressed by Macknight. In his book, *The Epistles of John*, he writes as follows:

“The phrase “unto death” signifies “tending towards death,” rather than the actual condition of being in death. Accordingly, this would seem to rule out the view that the state referred to is that in which a child of God has lost all communion with the Lord for that would involve a condition of spiritual death, already experienced, instead of that which tends toward it.

“As to the subject of death, the only conclusion that seems possible is that the reference is to physical death. That is spoken of as the result of certain sins, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, and that of the moral delinquent in 1 Corinthians 5, and again in the case of those who partake of the Lord’s Supper unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:30), where sleep refers to physical death.[10]

To me this seems to harmonize best with the circumstances and with the Scriptures. If God visited sickness upon a brother because he had sinned, and another had the power of discernment by which he could determine that the divine decree did not involve death as a part of the punishment, he could pray for the sick man and life would be granted to the man as a result of the petition. He would not have to continue in his punishment. “The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (James 5:15).

On the other hand, if the sin was such that God decreed death, or capital punishment, prayer would be unavailing. “There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it” (1 John 5:16; KJV). Of course, it would have been useless for Peter to have prayed for Ananias and Sapphira. Three hours after Ananias died for his guilt, Peter told Sapphira she would suffer the same fate because she was equally involved in the sin. God has no double standard.

I do not think the record means to imply that there was a specific sin “unto death,” any more than there was a specific sin “not unto death.” The difference lay, not in the overt act, but in the motivation and nature of the one committing the sin. Ananias and Sapphira died because of a lie growing out of a conspiracy. The Corinthians died because of their partisan debasement of the Lord’s Supper. Many commentators think that “the destruction of the flesh” referred to in the case of the blatant fornicator (1 Corinthians 5:5) meant a death decree when he was turned over to Satan.

Does God still directly visit sickness and death upon men and women who are guilty of kindred sins? Although my answer will not satisfy everyone who reads this book, I am not hesitant to say I do not believe that He does. In the primitive era of the community of the called-out ones, a directness of dealing was essential. This directness is not now essential to the fulfillment of the divine purpose. At that time there were no New Covenant Scriptures to circulate as guidelines for spiritual and moral behavior, nor to

remind men that they would be “reserved unto the judgment of that great day.”

Every social institution requires certain measures in its inception and foundational era, that it may later outgrow or discard. Kingdoms and nations mature as do the individuals who compose them. As succeeding generations develop an increasing sense of responsibility, methods of punishing derelictions of duty may change. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” does not mean God limits His methods today to what He did in previous centuries. He is no longer obligated to relieve the hunger of five thousand persons with five loaves and two fish. Neither should we think Him obligated to grant men and women the same gifts as He did in the formative stages of the church. Indeed, this is one sign that few “miracle workers” lay claim to performing, although it would be a tremendous asset to missionaries in famine-stricken areas.

I do not consider the sin “unto death” as being the blasphemy against the Spirit. I cannot conceive of the sin against the Spirit as being a reflection against, or a rejection of, a mere influence in the world. The Scriptures seem to indicate that blasphemy is an assault upon and a false accusation of a divine Person, so grave in nature as to place the one who commits it outside the domain of God’s forgiveness.

Notes:

9. James Macknight, D.D., *Apostolical Epistles* (Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1841), pp. 673, 674.
10. First printed by Oliphants, Ltd., England. Published in Britain without copyright.

[This is Chapter 7 of Carl’s book, *Heaven Help Us*.]

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